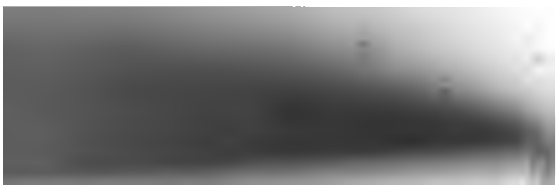

The Lover Fugitives

Click! click! Heels rattled on the gravel path near at hand.

Frontispiece.] [*p.* 69.

[illegible] found on the gravel path near at [illegible]

The Lover Fugitives

A Romance

By

John Finnemore

Author of
"The Red Men of the Dusk," etc.

With a Frontispiece
by Harold Piffard

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THE LOVER FUGITIVES

CHAPTER I

THE HEAD ON THE POST

EARLY on a fine August morning in the year 1685 I rode through Winchester on my way home from London, my man, Tom Torr, at my heels. Some miles out of the town I entered upon a long stretch of open road, and saw at the far end of the level causeway bright sparkles and flashes as of the sun falling upon burnished armour. Soon I made out a troop of cavalry advancing at a walk. As we drew near each other I knew the regiment by the facings, and next I recognised the officer riding before them. Lieutenant Poyntz recognised me at the same moment.

"What! Ferrers?" he called out, as he rode over to my side of the road, then drew rein, and we greeted each other; but the next instant my eyes were drawn to the detachment which followed, and I understood the slow pace of the horsemen. Six troopers rode two by two, and with them walked a tall, ruddy-faced man in the corduroys and top-boots of a farmer. His round, red English face was set and grim; his bright-blue eyes stared proudly before him; but, alas! his arms were bound at his back, and a rope stretched from his wrists

to the bonds of those who walked next. Two by two after him came eight other stalwart, brown-faced fellows, ploughmen and the like by their looks, but dirty and dishevelled, their clothes torn and stained, and one or two bandaged as if suffering from wounds. Now, for the first time, the sickening sense of what this futile Monmouth Rebellion meant to our west-country lads came home to my heart. I was fresh from London, where the most dreadful threats of vengeance were filling the air. The intention of the Privy Council to give to the west-country a terrible lesson had already leaked out; and I looked with heavy eyes on the poor fellows tramping along, roped one to the other like a gang of desperate criminals to whom it is hopeless to show mercy.

Such a glorious morning as this was their birthright. They should have been, sickle in hand, among the corn, now painting the landscape with patches of bright gold; the farmer should have been at their head, or pounding along the road to market on his stout cob. On many and many such a morning had I ridden that road and seen such men straightening their backs to scan the passing traveller, and give their honest, simple greeting; had drawn rein to pass the time of day with such-and-such a farmer, and speak of crops and the outlook of the season.

Doubtless these thoughts marked my face, for my acquaintance, a pleasant, frank English lad, said, quietly, "You don't like it, Captain?"

"No, Poyntz," I replied, "I don't."

"Nor I," said he. "Of course it cuts deeper into you, being a west-country man yourself; but I've seen things——" He paused and drew a deep breath. There was a short silence before he spoke again.

"I suppose, now the scare's over, it's easy to get leave?"

"I'm not away on leave," I answered. "I've resigned my commission."

"Resigned your commission?" he returned, open-eyed and wondering.

"Yes," I said. "I waited until all possibility of being ordered on active service was over, and then left the army."

"Well," he said, slowly, "I can understand it, when you belong to these parts. Upon my soul, I'd resign my commission, too, sooner than do again what I've had to do lately; and if they started such deviltries in bonnie Yorkshire, where I was bred, begad! I'd go over to the other side, and back up the yokels. These poor wretches were turned over to me early this morning as I set out for Winchester. They were routed out on the farmer's place somewhere near Romsey, just after dark last night."

"Is the man in front a rebel?"

"Not a fighting rebel. It seems the eight men made their way back across country to their native village, and he hid them and fed them."

"And now he'll share their fate?" said I.

"'Tis beyond a doubt," returned my acquaintance. "And yet what should we do if old friends in trouble came knocking at our door?"

"What, indeed?" I answered. "There is word in London that Jeffreys will come down to try them."

My companion shrugged his shoulders.

"A short shrift and a long rope, eh?" he said.

Then he took his leave and galloped after his detachment, while I put Roan Robin once more to the trot, and posted on.

Half a mile from Romsey a lame beggar-man stepped out of a thicket and came down the road towards us. I was walking my horse, and the click of the fellow's crutches rattled plainly on the stony track. He had one leg slung up in a long bandage which passed round his neck, and he moved heavily and feebly. Twenty yards lay between us when he stopped with a low groan and raised a lack-lustre eye. His glance at once sharpened and brightened; he drew himself up as straight as a larch, kicked his leg briskly out of the loop, tucked his crutches under his arm, and stepped to meet me with the gait of a gamecock.

"Jan Torr," said I, "you disgrace of as decent a family as ever lived, are you not hung yet?"

"No, Master George," replied the rogue, with a cheerful grin. "Beggin' ne'er run to a hangin' job, an' that's the worst against me yet.—How d'ye, Tom?" he continued, nodding patronisingly to his brother, who

blushed with shame, as he always did when he happened to come across the graceless vagrant.

I dropped something into the broken hat the tattered scamp held boldly up, and rode away amid his blessings. No one would have dreamt that the spruce fellow at my heel—and a more steady, trustworthy man never rode there—and the beggar with his greasy wallet buckled about him were brothers; yet so it was. Tom and Jan Torr were the only children of a most respectable couple; but some vagrant strain, coming from who knows where, had broken out in the younger son, and work he would not. He lived on the old folks till they died, and then, with the lightest heart in the world, took the road and joined the noble fraternity of cadgers and mumpers. Once in a while he gave a look round his native spot, and was now returning from such a journey. I had never seen him on crutches before, and perceived it was a new trick he was practising.

At Romsey we made a halt of a couple of hours, baited the horses, and refreshed ourselves. When we started again things began to look home-like. We had now but fifteen miles to go before we reached Whitemead, on the northern border of the New Forest, and Romsey was our market-town. Every field, every spinney, was a familiar sight; and the pleasant wooded landscape sleeping quietly in the hot August sunshine had that smiling, personal air of welcome found only in one's native reach of country.

We followed a byroad; and, the weather having been

fine and dry, the going was good, and we made Cowslip Knap in an hour and a half from Romsey. From the summit of the ridge the whole of the Whitemead valley lay before us: the village clustered round the church, the mill in the hollow, and my own house, Whitemead Priory, half-way up the opposite slope. But none of these drew my first glance. My eyes turned southward to a ridge crowned with dark pines, and at the mere sight of a stack of chimneys climbing above the dusky crest my heart throbbed quicker and quicker, and I wondered what Cicely was doing, and whether I dared ride over this evening.

I had not seen her since the last February, and then I had felt diffident, and had gone away without speaking; but six months of heartache and longing had spurred me on to put my fate to the trial, and yea or nay I would have, and that shortly. So I said stoutly to myself, and yet I feared whether my hard-won courage would hold out under the fire of her beautiful brown eyes.

This, with a young fellow's selfishness, was the main current of feeling; but underneath lay an uneasiness as to what I might hear of my people and this wretched outbreak. Thousand-tongued rumour had been busy to a degree, but of reliable news I had had none, and I knew Whitemead folks well enough to be pretty sure that a contingent had marched off under the blue banner.

Fifty yards down from the ridge we entered an oak-

wood, through the heart of which ran two roads. Where they crossed, a sign-post was set up to guide travellers. I was passing it when a frightened voice called out behind me:

"Captain!—Master George! Look there! Look at the sign-post!"

I looked, and gave such a start as to jerk the reins and bring my steed up instantly. The sign-post was surmounted by an iron spike, and from this spike a ghastly, gory head looked down upon us,—a venerable grey head, the silvery hairs clotted with blood and clinging stiffly about the skull. The distorted face was pale as wood-ashes, except where it was marked with blotches of blood, which was now dark and dried, and peeling in the heat. I was shocked utterly and beyond telling. It was John Woodley, the old gamekeeper,—old John, who had placed my first carbine in my hand, had taught me to shoot, taught me everything I knew of woodland lore,—a simple, honest, upright man; and here was his head stuck up as I had seen on London Bridge that of many a rogue. Here, indeed, was an earnest of the bloody stories which had flown through the land from end to end. The head was tilted slightly forward, and the wide-open, staring eyes looked down towards us with a fixed, dreadful look.

"John Woodley!" murmured Tom, his face as white as chalk.

I drew Roan Robin closer under the post, gathered my feet under me, and leapt up on to the saddle.

My hand was stretched out to take down the pitiable relic, when the door of a cottage a little below was flung open, and a terrified voice called, shrilly, "Let un bide! Let un bide!"

I looked round in great surprise to discover my gainsayer; for the oak-wood was mine, the sign-post was mine, the cottage was mine, the woodman who lived there was my servant, and the head to which my hand was reached had spent almost its every thought in the service of my house. It was the woodman who was shouting at me, and Tom Torr fired up instantly.

"Are ye mad, Joe Beech," he roared, "to dare to say such words to the Captain?"

Beech, with no thought for the indignation of Tom Torr, now came forward, his hands raised in frenzied appeal.

"Let un bide, Master George!" he screamed, his voice raised to an unnatural pitch. "Oh, let un bide!"

Behind the man, his wife and children had run out into the road. The woman, a noted termagant, was weeping in an extremity of terror, and about her skirts clung a mob of yellow-haired, weeping children, and from one and all rose a shrill wail, "Let un bide!"

I withdrew my hand from the clay-cold cheek on which I had laid it, dropped into the saddle again, and beckoned the man forward. He came, and broke into his tale as he did so:

"'Twor' the night afore last, Captain, just on sundown, I 'eard a rattle o' feet, an' looked out, an' there

wor' seven or eight o' they dragoons comin' down the road. I got me back to the 'ouse an' peered out o' winder, an' then I see old John Woodley in the midst o' 'em. They took un, it seems, on One Elm Waste, an' seein' 'e wor' all worn wi' travel would 'ave it 'e wor' a rebel. An' the truth soon wor' out, for 'e up an' defied 'em, an', 'tis said, waved 'is cap an' cried, 'God save King Monmouth!' Be that as it may, they come down 'ere, an' the old man that spent 'e could scarce drag one leg arter t'other. Right 'ere under sign-post 'e dropped in the road, an' the soldiers cursed un by every name they could lay tongue to. 'We'll 'ave to carry un,' says the corp'al. ''Ang un to sign-post,' cried another; ''tis but a rebel. Ain't we strung up scores an' scores?' 'Ay, ay,' cried two or three more; 'swing un! swing un! Save trouble o' carryin' un.' 'Set the cursed rebel on 'is legs,' says the corp'al. 'I'll do justice on the rogue quicker'n that. Now, lads, d'ye mark me cleave un to the teeth. 'Twill show ye 'ow to 'andle a broadsword.' They dragged the poor old man up an' set un on 'is legs. The corp'al took 'is distance an' drew 'is girt sword. Then 'e slid the edge o' the blade along old John's head, as a man draws 'is mark on a place 'e means to strike, an' swung up the sword. John Woodley neither moved nor spake. I could see his lips agoin', as if 'e wor' a-prayin'; but 'e stood there calm an' steady. Down whizzed the sword an' down dropped the old man; an' the dragoon chaps all roared an' roared wi' laughin', for the corp'al 'ad made but a miss-

'it arter all, an' struck the side o' the 'ead. Ye can see the great bloody cut now, an' just over yon right ear. 'Owever, 'twor' enough. The old man wor' dead as a nit. Then they 'acked off 'is 'ead an' set it on sign-post, an' the corp'al 'e come 'ere an' called me out. 'See 'ere, my man,' says 'e; 'yon's a warnin' for all folk to keep the peace an' honour the king. D'ye take care none meddles wi' it. We'll be this way again within the week; and if so be ye've let any meddle wi' our work we'll set a light to yer thatch as sure as ye've a roof over yer 'ead.' Then they went."

"What of the body?" I asked, as the woodman ceased speaking.

"I buried un in the wood, sir," replied Beech. "They said naught about that. 'Twor' just tumbled into ditch."

I drew my reins into my bridle-hand and trotted off. My impulse to take down the head had passed. Were the consequences to fall upon me alone I would have risked it; but could I protect my own people against the savage fury of the victors, drunk with blood, and seeking every pretext for revenge? I knew very well I could not, and I held my hand from making mischief.

Before I left London loud complaints had poured in of revolting cruelties perpetrated by the brutal soldiery upon the hapless country-folk; not, mark you, upon the peasantry who followed Monmouth,—they were given over at once as a fox is given to be broken up by the hounds,—but upon innocent people, who had taken no

part in the rising, and whose only crime consisted in the fact that they lived in the doomed west-country. King and Council had laughed all complaints to scorn; had sent down order after order, fiercer, crueller, bloodier. None knew so well as they how the smallest success of the rebels would have led to a general outbreak against James and his mad passion for thrusting Romish doctrine down the throat of a Protestant nation; none were so resolved to visit the broken movement with a punishment so terrible as to cow the disaffected everywhere into silence.

I turned a corner, and my heart leaped. Politics flew from my thoughts, and I devoured with all my eyes the picture of a young lady trotting towards me on a grey horse, a serving-man close behind.

Cicely! The name formed itself on my lips, and my face was on fire, I knew, as I bowed low on her approach. She drew rein and smiled faintly, and, as I thought, coldly. Her beautiful face was pale, but her eyes burned with more than common brightness.

"Cicely!" said I, joyously, "is all well with you?"

"Yes, George," she replied, gravely. "We are as usual. Your coming is unlooked for. I thought you were not to return until October."

There was something in her measured words which touched my heated spirit with an icy chill. As for the use of the Christian names, that meant nothing. We had known each other from childhood.

"No," said I; "but in these awkward times a man's

plans change at a day's notice, and he finds himself marching hither and thither when he least expects it, putting old acquaintances to the trouble of greeting him months before the proper time."

In my uneasiness, you see, I was attempting a sprightly speech, and was about as lucky as usual. I have no gifts in that direction, and had best have left it alone. To turn such a stroke one needs a light, touch-and-go air, and it is a fatal blunder to do what I could not help, and that was to plead with eyes and smile for a little more kindness. I did not get it. Cicely replied politely to the more formal inquiries I made after her mother, and then her grey horse became restive. I could not detain her longer, and away she went at a swift trot, and I moved on homeward with a heart no longer bounding in time to the nimble hoofs under me. I felt pretty sure that her grey nag would not have given such signs for hurrying off on his own account, and I wondered what her little heel had been doing on the other side. Why should she do it? I had never known Cicely avoid me before. A coquette? No. Her frank, open, gentle nature held no trace of such a spirit. She was offended. How? We had parted on our old friendly footing, and I knew of nothing which could have altered it. I had been so confident of the smile which had never yet failed me that the loss of it cut all the deeper, and my heart throbbed uneasily. How stood my day-dreams now?

CHAPTER II

A RIVAL IN THE FIELD

THE next day I took another horse—for Roan Robin had earned a holiday—and rode over to Great Barrow, where Cicely and her mother lived alone, her father having been dead many years. The old butler showed me into a morning-room, where I found Mistress Plumer, the elder lady, seated by herself. Here, at any rate, was no change.

"My dear George!" she cried, and came slowly across the room to meet me, for she was an invalid.

We sat down and conversed for a while, and my uneasy heart began to beat a little more freely. I glanced round, and she smiled.

"You wonder not to see Cicely?" she said. "She has gone to spend the day at Rushmere. It is an old engagement. I should have gone too had I felt equal to it. Sir Humphrey Lester himself rode over for her this morning."

"Yes," I replied; "Cicely was always a great favourite of his."

"And you too, George," cried Mistress Plumer. "Why should you not ride on and join the party? They will be delighted to see you."

"I have received no invitation," I said.

"Invitation!" cried Mistress Plumer. "Whatever has come over you, George? The idea of your needing an invitation to ride up to Rushmere! And then no one had any idea of your dropping from the clouds in this fashion, so how could they send you an invitation? Go at once."

It was not difficult to allow myself to be persuaded, and I climbed into the saddle once more, and went at a gallop over open grassy country for Rushmere Hall.

It was an hour's ride, and I cantered up the avenue and came out near the bowling-green to see a group of gentlemen enjoying a game as a breather before dinner. The first to catch sight of me was Commodore Cliffe, the brother-in-law of Sir Humphrey Lester, and a distant relation of my own. He hailed me with a stentorian "Ahoy!" and came forward to shake my hand. This drew the attention of the players, and a pause was made in the game.

I greeted several old friends, including Sir Humphrey himself, and was introduced to a batch of new acquaintances. Among the latter were some officers belonging to troops quartered in the neighbourhood. One of these, a Captain Baywood, I already knew slightly; the others were strangers to me. When all due civilities had passed the game was resumed, and after delivering my horse to a servant, I stood near the Commodore to look on.

"Down here on furlough, eh, George?" said he.

He always spoke as if hailing the main-top, and I saw the officers look up curiously for my answer.

"No, sir," I replied; "I have left the army."

"A thundering good job, too," roared the old sailor, who had all a seaman's contempt for soldiers. "Why couldn't you have been rated on one of His Majesty's ships if ye wanted to do something?"

To this I had no answer, and the Commodore scratched his chin with the iron hook which served him for a right hand, and appeared to deliberate on the news. His quick eye caught the officers whispering together, and he demanded the date of my resignation. I gave it, and he trumpeted it out.

"Yes, yes. Of course, after the fighting was over. 'Tis a bad business, a cursed, cruel business."

Sir Humphrey drew near and begged his brother-in-law to hide his opinion of recent affairs out of regard for the guests.

"Ay, ay, brother," growled the Commodore, "you're right, you're very right. I'll say naught. Come, George."

He wagged his head to me and drew me aside to talk of the reasons which had urged me in throwing up my commission. He approved them roundly, with a great volley of ringing quarter-deck oaths. He was west-country heart and soul, and the butchery of our poor misguided lads had cut him to the quick, as had been the case with me.

"Luckily I was left on guard-duty in London," said

I, "and so escaped having actually to fight against my own people; but when the trouble was over for the moment, and I could resign with a good conscience, I came out of it. There was no difficulty made about the matter; scores were ready to take my place. Every hanger-on at Court is looking out for a vacancy either for himself or a friend."

"I doubt, lad, you've done no good for yourself in high places by saying farewell at such a time. There is something pointed in a man of our parts stripping off his uniform now."

"I care not, Commodore," I answered. "I have seen the Court pretty closely for the last two years, and bear it no love. I can content myself with Whitemead and old friends."

All the time we talked my eyes were busy searching for Cicely. Where was she? No ladies were looking on at the bowl-play, and as we rambled away from the bowling-green, which was at the side of the house, I led my companion towards the broad terrace at the front. Here was another large company, both ladies and gentlemen, strolling up and down on the wide flags overlooking the beautiful gardens, and then away across a smiling country of fields and meadows and orchards to the great purple masses of the New Forest woodlands lining the horizon. Coats of blue and white, and scarlet, and shining, flowered satin gowns, made the terrace as brilliant as the flower-beds below. A lively babble of laughter and voices filled our ears as

we passed through a doorway in a flanking wall and came upon this gay scene, radiant in the strong sunshine. Here were more officers, gentlemen of the neighbourhood, and their wives and daughters: such a gathering as hospitable Sir Humphrey and his wife loved.

"Why," said I, "half the county are here."

"I believe sister asked them all," said the Commodore. "She has a rare fancy for a crowd. And there's my pretty Cicely, the sweetest maid in the west-country, be the next who she may."

I had seen her too, and had choked back an exclamation, for a swift, cruel thought had darted through my mind like a flame. Did not the sight of the pair before me explain her coldness of yesterday? She was walking up and down with a man nearly as tall as myself, dressed in a splendid suit of scarlet and silver. They were a little apart from the rest, and his air was unmistakable: it was that of a gallant offering profound homage. Either she was accepting it as a matter of course, or she was innocent and utterly unconscious of his meaning. I knew Cicely, and was well aware that the second explanation was quite possible, yet the first tortured me.

We were now joined by a neighbour, Squire Hampton, a fussy, self-important little man, always full of country gossip, and for ever busy adding to or distributing his budget. For a few minutes the talk ran on slight matters; then he pointed with a knowing wink at Cicely and her companion.

"Not much doubt there, I think," he said, with a chuckle; "quite a surprise to me, though I generally know what's going on in the country as well as most."

"You are devilish prying, that's a fact," grunted the Commodore, who did not love him.

Squire Hampton took care to be deaf to this remark, and rattled on glibly to me.

"My Lord Kesgrave is coming your way for his countess, 'tis clear enough, Mr. Ferrers. Quite an honour for your countryside. Miss Plumer is a close neighbour of yours, eh?"

I said nothing, but watched the pair steadily.

"As handsome a couple as ever I clapped eyes on," said Commodore Cliffe, as if to himself.

The old gentleman was right. It was years since I had seen the Earl of Kesgrave, and then the prettiness of his features had been womanish. Now they had darkened and strengthened. His face was thinner, and deeply lined, and his tall, handsome figure carried his superb dress easily; he had the grand air, and the country squires and dragoon officers about him formed a mere foil against which he blazed. As for his companion, beauty and grace had ever been her birthright; to paint Cicely's portrait were but to attempt to twist superlatives between my clumsy fingers, and superlatives are all too weak.

"What think you, Mr. Ferrers?" said Squire Hampton, his small, ferrety eyes searching my countenance

with an air which betokened he had his suspicions of me.

"Why," said I, coolly, "they are the handsomest couple I ever saw. My Lord Kesgrave has greatly improved; he has seen wind and weather, and got the pink-and-white washed out of his face to much advantage."

"Ay, ay," said Hampton, but not heartily.

I saw that he had counted on a jealous speech for a certainty to add to his fardel of gossip. He moved off, and the Commodore snorted.

"Can't abide that fellow," growled the old sailor, "for ever tittle-tattling and carrying gossip. I ain't surprised, for a good half-dozen times of late I've seen Kesgrave striking across the heath below my park towards Great Barrow. Hullo! here's sister."

Lady Lester stopped, with a cry of surprise, as she saw me, then came to meet me as I advanced to greet her.

"Why, George," she said, "this is a pleasure to see you back. When did you come?"

I told her, and we stood chatting for a few moments. The next turn of the promenade brought Cicely and my Lord Kesgrave close upon us. Cicely looked up suddenly and swiftly, as if her glance had been drawn by intuition towards me. I was looking at her over the head of my kind old friend the hostess, and I dare say my gaze was melancholy enough. She flushed a little,

then paled. I started, and Lady Lester looked round to see whither my eyes were drawn.

"Oh, 'tis Cicely," she said; and I stepped forward and made my bow.

"I think we have met before, Mr. Ferrers," said my Lord Kesgrave as we saluted each other.

"Yes," said I, "at Oxford."

"Ah!" he went on, with a polite, lofty air. "Oxford it was. I've been abroad most of the time since then. How go things in London?"

We talked for a while of events so far as I had newer accounts to furnish of London happenings; then a squad of acquaintances who had learned of my appearance bore down upon me, and I was separated from Cicely again. My heart became more and more uneasy, for still she showed no sign of our old pleasant comradeship, no sign of the cheerful freedom which had existed between us for so many years.

At dinner I had not the luck to get a place near her; she had my Lord Kesgrave on one hand and Squire Hampton on the other, and I was some little distance down the table on the opposite side. The light was at my back and fell full upon Cicely and her companion, and I studied Kesgrave attentively. Certainly, here was no mean rival, and a man not easily to be turned aside in the race for a lady's favour. He was now nearly thirty, for I knew him to be some three years older than myself; he looked forty, and would never look more mature, more serenely master of himself, at fifty. He

wore his own brown hair, fine and abundant as a woman's, in long, flowing, silken curls; the oval of his face was perfect as ever, but the features were greatly changed. Heavy lines were graven beneath his large lustrous eyes, his brow was furrowed, his lip firmer and harder, and a wrinkle was folded above his delicate arching nostrils. His beauty was a trifle haggard, and, being so, it exercised a fascination a thousand times deeper and subtler than the girlish charms which had won for him the name of "the Lady" at Magdalen nine years before. He had started on his travels soon after leaving the university, and had found the Continent so much to his liking that he spent years as an ordinary traveller spends months. I had understood more than once that his tent was set up rather in Venice than in Leyden. A short study of his features went far to confirm the report. Nights at the green-cloth and the wine-cup were indicated there in hieroglyphics too clear to be mistranslated. No stylus leaves a more enduring record on that human palimpsest.

"Did you see the Duke lose his head, Mr. Ferrers?" asked Mistress Hampton, a stout, red-faced country dame, seated opposite to me.

"Yes, madam," I replied, "and he faced the axe more boldly than I had expected when one considers his conduct after Sedgemoor."

"Would that I had taken my trip to London later," she went on, with a sigh, "and I might have seen it too."

"You have been in London this year?" said I.

"Last May," she replied; "but there was nothing like that to be seen—nothing but mere rogues and footpads carried to Tyburn, and the like."

"Zounds!" chirped her husband from a little above her, "you enjoyed what you saw, Mrs. Hampton. At any rate, you laughed all the time, whether at the play or at Bridewell. Had you seen such a thing so far from the ordinary as Monmouth's head rolling into the sawdust, strike me! you would have been suffocated with delight."

"Truly, London is a pleasant place," said the lady, with another sigh, this time at the memory of departed joys. "What a day we had at Bridewell!" She smiled as she recalled it.

"Ay, ay," said her husband. "Sir Wilfred Capern made up a party for a jaunt on whipping-day, and invited us to join it."

"Laugh!" chimed in the country lady. "I did laugh that day. There was one big, blowsy wench; oh, how she did yell when the whip fell across her back! It was as good as a play."

"Faith, madam," chuckled an officer who sat next her, "you have no need to go as far as London to see that sport. You have only to ride with us when we are beating the country for these rebel rogues. I can tell you when we suspect some of these cottage-women of knowing a hiding-place, a pair of stirrup-leathers across their shoulders renders us good assistance."

"Serve them right, the hussies," rejoined Mistress Hampton. "Whip them soundly, Major. I would that every rebel were safe under lock and key. Mr. Hampton has done what he could to that end, I assure you. He has already taken nine fellows about our country, and I hope his exertions will not be overlooked in the proper quarter."

Squire Hampton took off a glass of wine with a careless air as if his own merits were the last subject to which his thoughts turned, but could not repress a complacent look when the Major remarked that such loyalty deserved a spray from the fountain of honour.

The Commodore, seated near me, had ceased to attend to his dinner, and I knew what was coming, and smiled to myself.

"Now there, Mistress Hampton and Major Ryecroft, you have the advantage of me," he began, in his smoothest tones; but his lip and nostril curled. "I've fought Don and Dutchman, and seen many's the time cannon-bullets hopping about like peas. I'm an old hard-a-weather sailor, and yet there you notch a point in courage clean beyond me. Yes, a lady and a dragoon officer are my betters, easy. I can't abide to see a woman flogged."

A broad smile began to widen on the faces of the near diners; my Lord Kesgrave laughed audibly. Major Ryecroft flushed and set up a wooden grin, as if he tasted the joke and wished to take it pleasantly.

Mistress Hampton bridled and looked loftily at the Commodore.

"A man, now," continued the latter. "Ay, ay, trice him up and give him three dozen at once if he deserves it; that's another thing. But a woman; no, I can't stand it. I was in London in the spring, and one day I took a chair down to the Mall from my lodgings. On the way we ran into a crowd following a whipping-cart. At the tail of it was a poor wretch with a child in her arms and two others running at her skirts. By what I could make out she had snatched a loaf from a baker's stall, and they were flogging her through the town. The dirty mob howled for joy as the rascally hangman swung his whip and laid the bloody weals across her back. And, so please you, the scurvy rogues carrying me set down the chair to enjoy the fun. I promise you I was out at a jump to let them feel the weight of my cane. They were glad enough to set their shoulders again under the poles and trudge on."

This put an end to such brutal chatter, and indeed to all conversation so far as Mistress Hampton and the Major were concerned. They said no more, and looked very foolish to boot.

CHAPTER III

WORDS OVER THE WINE

WHEN the ladies were gone, and we were left to our wine, the Commodore drank gaily round. Major Ryecroft pledged him, but with no good-will; and it was clear that he was brooding over the sarcasm of his senior. The talk turned upon the state of the country and the doings of the King's troops, and these were lauded freely. Many at the table were wholly on the side of authority as at present constituted, and those who were not did not care to support opposite views, since they could do no good. One only could not be silenced. It was the Commodore, and on hearing of a cold-blooded piece of cruelty told as a joke he blazed out.

"Forty-seven years," he cried, "I served my country at sea, and saw as much fair and honest fighting as any man; and yet I never heard of tricks played on Moors, Turks, or heathen negroes to equal what's done to-day by English to English. 'Tis not the King's orders, I declare. I'm loyal as any man in this realm; and, 'fore God! I trust he'll disavow the rogues who disgrace his uniform. There's none so cruel as a coward who has his opponent down."

The old gentleman was to find himself grievously mistaken as to his King; but that was a matter for

another day. Here was now the table in a roar at this bold speech, and the officers furious. Major Ryecroft, the senior officer present, had his own bone to pick with the Commodore, and his voice rang loudest.

"Your words," he cried, "reflect on His Majesty's service, sir. You are old and disabled; nothing else saves you from instant punishment."

"You're monstrous polite, Major," roared the Commodore. "Old and crippled, eh? So I'm to keep my mouth shut while you boast of your sneaking deviltries. Perhaps I can find——"

"Brother! brother!" cried Sir Humphrey from the head of the table, "I beseech you to put this unhappy quarrelling on one side. These gentlemen do but obey their orders, as their duty calls on them; and who should know better than you that obedience is imperative?"

"Ay, ay, Humphrey," said the Commodore, "I want to raise no gale at your board; and, to be sure, as you say, discipline calls for instant carrying out of all orders, good and bad."

This half-apology for his heat calmed things down, and no more was said to him by the officers. Indeed, they had turned their eyes as one man upon me instead of my kinsman.

Sir Humphrey had known very well what the latter was driving at, and had struck in soon enough to defeat the Commodore as far as words went; but the old seaman had laid his hook upon my sleeve, and every one

understood very well that he looked to me to draw the sword for him. For my part, I scarce knew what was going forward. My mind ran entirely upon Cicely and Kesgrave. The latter was looking on with an amused smile, and now drank politely towards the Commodore. That seasoned old vessel pledged him deeply in return, and in a measure concord was restord to the meeting. 'Twas but for an instant.

"I hear that you have left the army, Mr. Ferrers," said the Earl.

"Yes," I replied. "The country is more to my taste than London."

"Rather a strange time to resign a commission," remarked Major Ryecroft.

"Your opinion was not asked on the question, Major Ryecroft," I said. "And for a west-country man the time is by no means strange."

The Major laughed offensively, as if he thought he had pricked me deeply, and two or three of his brother-officers began to talk as their natures prompted them; for Sir Humphrey's wine was very good, and they had not spared it.

"Said to be a wonderful man with buttoned foils," so one voice rose above the clatter, emphasising the word "buttoned."

"Precious queer, resigning now," called out another. "Doubt if we ought to allow him to sit with us." A tipsy voice began to sing the coarsest verse in the old ballad about Sir John Suckling and the Scots, and

there was much laughter. A little below me sat a cornet, a tall, handsome lad, his face burning with wine, and his young fiery heart eager to take up the quarrel the Commodore's action had set on foot between his corps and myself. His fingers were working convulsively about the bowl of his wine-glass, yet he hesitated to take the final step. I smiled quietly at him, and he blushed hotter yet.

"Pray," said I, leaning forward, "spare me that unpleasantness. I assure you I do not require to be wound up by the sensations of wine filling my eyes and running down into my neck. If you or any other gentleman——"

"Charlton," roared Major Ryecroft, interrupting me, "do not come between me and Mr. Ferrers."

"You hear," said I, nodding towards the Major, "your senior officer demands first turn. If I run away from him, then you may throw the wine by all means."

The more sober of the elders now burst in upon us, and tried to straighten affairs out; but the incensed military were in no mood to be pacified. The Commodore they could not attack, but my blood they were resolved upon. The old sea-dog himself was in high feather.

"Pooh, brother!" he said, when Sir Humphrey came to make what peace he could. "Let the lads have a breather. Neither will be the worse for it. Not a man among 'em can touch George, and he wouldn't hurt a fly. 'Tis but a match without the buttons."

The majority of the party now moved to join the ladies; Squire Hampton, the Commodore, and a few more stuck steadily to the bottle. The evening was calm and beautiful, the windows of the great withdrawing-room stood open, and the ladies had sauntered out to the terrace and the wide lawn. Sir Humphrey had detained me a few moments, and my Lord Kesgrave had not let his opportunity slip. He was at Cicely's side; and, for the first time in my life, I was a little afraid of her. This new, strange coldness chilled me so that I did not dare to thrust myself into her company without an invitation, open or tacit; and I received none. It was not for want of watching for it. I hung about her neighbourhood, but she seemed to feel my presence, and resolutely averted her eyes. I rambled about the terrace, and became involved in other groups of the company, and thus a couple of hours after dinner slipped away. Then the Commodore came out of the house and joined me, and eased his mind by cursing heartily the officers and the stories they told. He was in the midst of his commination when a flash of bright steel and scarlet caught my eye. The sun was getting low, and its level shafts raked the great avenue flanked by lofty limes. Up the broad road was galloping a trooper, his horse stretching at full speed.

"Eh?" said my companion. "Some message for the redcoats, I shouldn't wonder."

In a short time Captain Baywood was seen making

his way towards us as we leaned against the balustrade of the terrace.

"I am acting for Major Ryecroft, Mr. Ferrers," he said, bowing politely, "and I am forced to come to you in person. Sudden orders have arrived, and we must march. An opportunity to settle affairs may not immediately present itself if the present moment be let slip——"

"Any time you like," cut in the Commodore. "When do you get to horse?"

"We may not delay," said Captain Baywood.

"Beautiful bit o' turf outside the gates," said the Commodore. "No-man's-land. Humphrey's estate stops at the park palings. We'll go that way now. Bring your man on as soon as you like."

We slipped out of the throng, rambled into the gardens, and passed out into the park by a door in the farthest wall. From this point we reached the gates by secluded paths through the ferns, and came out on a patch of trim greensward, where we strolled up and down to await the officers. Soon, to a jingling of bridles and clanking of swords, the party cantered down, drew rein, and tied their horses to the hazel-bushes. Of the encounter which followed it is not worth while to speak. Whatever the Major could do with his regimental weapon, the broadsword, his abilities were scant enough with a rapier, and in less than twenty minutes the Commodore and I were returning up the avenue, my sword as clean as I had hoped it would remain.

We regained the terrace to find the company greatly thinned. Indeed, we had met several parties in the great avenue striking homeward before the dark, and had run the gauntlet of many significant nods and smiles from those who suspected our errand. Lady Lester swooped down on us and began to scold the Commodore vigorously for his bloodthirsty, quarrelsome ways, as she depicted them with sisterly frankness.

"God bless me, sister!" he cried. "Fight, d'ye say? Here's been no fight; we did but set the lobster-backed dragoon up, and George took his toasting-iron and twitched it up among the trees. Fight d'ye call it? 'Twas but a lesson in fencing, and a hint he'd better be more civil to an old man. Still, the lads are not bad lads at bottom. They gave us a hearty huzza as they rode off; though, egad! the Major didn't join in it."

I slipped away and left them to settle in their own fashion, and soon ran full on Sir Humphrey. He began to question me, and I satisfied him. Then I asked him where was Cicely?

"Gone," he said.

"With whom?"

"There's quite a party riding her way," he replied, "and some pass close to Great Barrow."

I made my adieux and got to horse without delay. My road lay along a smaller side-avenue. It was empty, and I took it at a swinging gallop as soon as I was out of sight of the house. When I had passed the lodge-gate on that side I took the open country and rode

across the heath. By a rude bridle-path I could cut off nearly a mile of road. The sun was down, but the west was still full of crimson and gold; the rabbits flitted in hundreds to their burrows as I thundered over their warrens, keeping a watchful eye for the cunning snares set by their holes; the pleasant fresh scents of the dewy evening were rising from the open furzy land. Cicely! Cicely! Cicely! The sweet syllables seemed to set themselves to the rhythmic gallop under me as I rode after her. I came out on the highway, or rather byway,—for it was but a wide, sandy heath-track,—and saw that I was still behind the party. From side to side the road was printed by fresh impressions of horse-shoes. I posted on and climbed a hill. The way ran directly across a great furrow of the heath. From the ridge I looked into the dip and saw the cavalcade I pursued just breasting the opposite slope. They rode by twos and threes, and the servants moved in a solid cluster behind. My eye fell on the leading pair, and I drew rein; my heart thumped uneasily again. Cicely and Kesgrave once more! What did he mean by coming this way? It was not the nearest to Greycote, his seat in this part of the country.

"Confound him!" I thought. "There's never an end of the fellow. Am I never to get a word with Cicely, and see where the land lies for me? Why is she so cold? Even if there were no hope for me in the world, why should she avoid me?"

The riders mounted the rise and disappeared over its

crest without any one discovering me. I walked my horse slowly to a place where roads crossed. The party had gained on me, and were now far in front, almost lost in the films of evening gathering over the dusky heath. I had given up my pursuit altogether. I had no heart to join them now. I drew the left-hand rein and turned into a cross-road leading away from the course they were pursuing, and heading straight for Whitemead Priory.

When I reached home and walked into the library, where I usually sat, a tall man rose from a chair beside the hearth, and laid down the long pipe he was smoking. It was Parson Upcher, the rector of the parish, and I was pleased to see him. We greeted each other warmly, and then he sat down to his pipe again.

"I heard you were not at home," I remarked.

"Came back from Salisbury to-day," said the parson, smiling all over his cheery red face, and smoothing back his white hair. "I heard you had come down from London, so I made my way up here, and sat down to wait for you."

"How did you get on?" I asked, for I knew he had gone to interpose on behalf of a falsely accused prisoner.

"I might just as well have stayed at home," he said, puffing slowly at the long silver tube. "Folks are crazy, high and low, over this dreadful business. I offered full proof that Job Prime had never left the village, never been ten miles away from Whitemead, let alone

at Sedgemoor; but it was all for nothing. 'He must go to the assizes now,'—that's all they would say,—'and I might bring forward my evidence there.'"

"Are there many fugitives hidden about here now?" I asked.

"Scores," replied Parson Upcher in a low voice. "I shut my eyes to them, and take care to know nothing. I was asked once or twice plump, while I was in Salisbury, could I tell of places where rebels lay? and I answered no. I could answer with a good conscience, for I knew of none; but they are hidden about the place, sure enough. A week last Thursday I met Sarah Thorne, just at twilight, by the willow coppice. I came on her suddenly, and the poor woman, what with the start and what with trying to drop me a curtsey, sent a big brown loaf rolling from under her cloak right across my feet. Her two lads joined Monmouth, and nobody is supposed to have any idea what's become of them."

"I trust the poor soul will keep them safely hidden till all's quiet," I remarked.

"I hope so," said the clergyman; "we want no more bloodshed. There has been plenty already."

There was silence for a few minutes while I filled and lighted a pipe; then Parson Upcher asked me how long I intended to stay.

"I have come for good," I replied. "The King must find another man to fill my uniform if this sort of work is to fall to his army."

"He won't find a man to fill your coat in a hurry,"

chuckled the parson; "but I'm glad enough to hear you've returned to us. It's better both for the estate and the folks who work on it to have the master at home. 'Tis true the house is big, and you are alone; but there's a remedy for that." The parson chuckled again.

"How long have Major Ryecroft and his people been about here?" I asked. The parson's laugh stirred thoughts I was willing should sleep, and I turned the conversation.

"Barely a week," he said. "The country about here was quiet enough till they came. The rebels lay still and the folk fed them secretly, and it was hoped things would blow over; but they have set the whole place by the ears. Riding and running, they have driven them out of cover like ferrets put into a rabbit-hole. People pop up under your feet whom you don't want to see—whom you ought not to see. Confound the redcoats!"

CHAPTER IV

THE REFUGEES

THE next morning I started off for Great Barrow again. I would make another attempt to see what lay between Cicely and myself. I had a bitterly uneasy feeling that it was Kesgrave,—he who had a great name, a great position, and great estates to offer. If it were so, there was nothing more to be done; but I was resolute to see where I stood, for the present wretched uncertainty was unbearable.

The country between Whitemead and Great Barrow is, in the main, a rough heath, the farms and meadows lying on the other side. Here and there dotted over the broken, furzy surface are thick clumps of thorn and hazel, with scantier patches of ash and oak. The track is stony along the bottom of one great furrow of the wild, desolate heathland, and here I walked my horse.

Turning a sudden corner, masked by a tall clump of brambles, the beast under me pulled up short just in time to avoid charging into a little forest-pony standing across the track. My thoughts were so far away that for a second I paid no particular heed, merely waiting for the animal to spring out of the way. Usually they are agile as cats, these small, half-wild creatures; and when it still stood motionless I was

forced to pay some attention to it. I glanced at it, and in an instant was fully on the alert. Upon its back was bound a kind of rude saddle, with a rope looped at each end and flung over for stirrups. It was black with sweat, its head hanging, and was trembling in every limb.

"Poor little brute," thought I; "why, it's as near foundered as no odds. It can't go a step again."

I looked round for its rider. On the one hand the thicket was impenetrable; on the other the ferns stood tall and unbroken. I sprang down, twisted the reins round a blackthorn branch, and walked along the line of ferns. I had not spent my life on the heath for nothing, so I soon discovered signs of passage. I followed, guided surely by the displaced fern-fronds, and came to the brink of a slight declivity where the ferns died away and the grass was clean and open. Now strange sounds began to come to my ears, and next I saw a sight which filled me with the purest wonder. A woman was moving down the slope with a man on her shoulders. The woman was so little that the man's feet dragged on the ground, splaying and sprawling; and all the way they went he was laughing and singing and talking, and now and again waving his arms. Every time he flung his arms out she tottered and swung to and fro, as if she must fall headlong under him; but she paused an instant, pulled herself steady, and went slowly on. Who these people were, and what they were doing on my land, was a puzzle I felt in-

clined to solve, and I went swiftly after them. The poor soul acting as beast of burden to the tall fellow was now bending to the earth, as if her back was like to crack, and still he continued to sing and gabble and laugh. My blood rose, and I hastened to see what this queer play meant.

I was not six yards away when she looked round. She gave a hollow groan, and her poor remnants of strength slipped from her. Down to earth she fell, her load rolling limply off her shoulders. Yet she was up again like lightning. She crouched on her knees and took the head of the man in her lap, and held him closely to her, bending over him as if to save him and shut off the eyes of the stranger from his face. I walked up to them, and at the first glance the truth darted into my mind. The poor unfortunate wretch stretched along the ground was horribly gaunt. His breeches and stockings fell loose about legs which seemed a pair of sticks inside the clothes; he was waving in the air a hand so thin and bloodless that it seemed as transparent as the horn of a lantern. His face was ghastly pale, his lips were black and cracked, and his eyes were filled with the wild light of delirium. A bandage on his forehead had slipped to one side, showing a great wound,—a sabre-cut, as I well knew. All the time he was rattling shrilly on, his voice thin and tired; but the words, an indistinguishable mass of swift, light sounds, poured out without stop or stay.

I looked at the woman. She was at the last stage of

exhaustion. Her face was grey-white like that of a corpse. Her breath came in quick gasps. Huge drops of sweat stood on her forehead, then ran together and fell. Her eyes were as the eyes of a deer run down after a long chase and when the huntsman's knife is at its throat. She held the man protectingly, but looked at me in hopeless despair, a terror beyond speech. Both were young.

Suddenly his wild delirium put their position beyond a doubt. His words became coherent.

"Stand to it, boys!" he cried, in the ghost of a shout, so great was his weakness. "Keep your pike-butts well down. Here they come. Never mind. We'll toss them back. God save King Monmouth!"

The thin hand was waved feebly in the air. The woman's face twisted like that of one who weeps; but no tears came.

"Ay, poor souls!" said I. "Madam, be easy, I beg you."

Her wild, hunted eyes filmed swiftly over, and the tears gushed. It was now weeks and weeks since the battle, and what an eternity of misery and apprehension she must have suffered! I tapped my boot with my riding-whip and thought for a moment. Then I remembered we stood within two hundred yards of a hut used by the turf-cutters, but at this time of the year deserted.

"Are you making for any particular refuge?" I asked.

"No," she said, in a hopeless voice. "We but fly."

"If such be your case," said I, "I will find you a shelter, modest, indeed, but, I believe, safe."

I tossed away my whip, stooped, and picked the man up. Poor wretch! I could have lifted him easily with one hand. He had returned to his senseless babbling, and smiled wildly as I raised him. I stepped towards the hut, and the woman moved at my side. I learned that the recent movements of troops had driven them from their hiding-place, and they had come fifteen miles by solitary ways since the previous mid-night. The man had been so severely wounded in the battle that for weeks he had lain fevered and delirious. He still remained very weak, and for the past two days they had wanted food. This and the exertion of moving had flung him back to his old disorder. The woman had marched beside the pony I saw, holding him on until the little creature could go no farther. While in this strait she had heard my horse's feet rattle on the stones beyond the turn of the path; then, by a last despairing effort, had managed to get her husband on her shoulders and drag herself into the ferns. In this attempt I had come upon them. They were of the farming class,—Robin and Hester Blake.

I entered the hut and laid Robin Blake down on a heap of dried leaves in the corner, then straightened my back and looked to the condition of the place. I saw, to my pleasure, that it was good. The wall had been redaubed and patched up in the spring. It served

the convenience of the turf-cutters, who came to this part of the heath every April and May to cut their winter's fuel. The place was far from any house, and to spare the journey home and back this hut was built. Here they spent the intervening night, for two long spring days sufficed for the task of cutting, and so again for the turning. All the turf had been carried home before the harvest, and, as regarded human presence, the heath had already entered upon its long winter sleep.

I took the whip which Hester had picked up and carried for me, and went quickly away. I ran, pounding along in my heavy riding-boots, until I came back to the road. The little pony stood where I had first seen it, my horse sniffing at it with an air of perplexity. I stripped off the clumsy pack-saddle and tossed it into the ferns. Upon feeling itself free, the tired creature pricked one ear a little and began to look round for grass. I knew it would be all right now, and I sprang into the saddle, untwisted the reins, and turned and galloped back home.

On the terrace before the house I saw the old butler feeding the peacocks. He left off with a look of surprise on seeing me back so soon, and came towards me.

"William," said I, "I want you to pack up a large basket with good food and wine, and put in any cordials you have of a nature to benefit a sick man; then make a bundle of my grey roquelaure and my blue riding-

cloak, and take the whole to the little gate giving on the heath, and wait for me there."

The old man laid a beseeching hand on my knee.

"Captain!—Master George!" said he, "let me go; do 'e now. Let me go."

He knew perfectly well what it meant. Such baskets as I spoke of now were being smuggled to fugitives all over the country.

"No, William," I replied; "I'll go myself. Every man must take his own risk to-day."

First he begged, then argued, next threatened, finally almost stormed at me; but I stood my ground, and at last he retreated to do as I wished. I handed my horse over to a stable-lad, told him to walk him up and down gently, and went into the house. The window of my bedroom commanded the path old William would follow, and within twenty minutes I saw his head moving along behind a tall box-hedge. Then I went out, mounted, and rode round by a longer way, so that we met at the gate. Here I had to undergo another hail of entreaties before he would yield up his burden; but I was flint on the point. John Woodley's head was scarce ever out of my thoughts, and this risk was honestly mine.

I rode back to the ash coppice, where the hut stood, and dismounted. Hester Blake's pale, famished face, with great black-ringed eyes, and pretty curling wisps of brown hair on her marble forehead, appeared at the door of the hut, and I gave her the basket. She uttered

a little dry sob, and thanked me in moving terms. I begged her to make herself and her husband as comfortable as might be, and said that I would come and see them again. Then I rode away to Cicely.

As I topped the ridge which shelters Great Barrow from the north-easterly blasts, I saw two figures below on the track which comes up to it from the south. They were horsemen, one behind the other. I recognised the foremost rider by sense almost before sight.

"Kesgrave again," thought I, and touching my nag with the spur, went down on the place with a hand-gallop. I gave my horse to a servant, and went into the house. I was shown into a room, and saw Cicely seated near the window at the farther end. It was a long room, and what was my surprise and delight to see her come bounding down it like a fawn. The dazzling bloom of her complexion was as radiant as sunlight on a smooth stream; her eyes were shining like great stars.

"Oh, George!" she cried, "why did you not tell me, the very instant we met, that you had left the army? I knew nothing—nothing of it until last night when coming home from Rushmere."

"Why, Cicely," said I, "I had no time to tell you anything. I've had no chance to get in a couple of words."

"You had a chance then," she said, with a pretty imperiousness. "It ought to have been the very first

word out of your mouth. The idea—the very idea—of concealing that for an instant!"

"I never thought of it," I replied, puzzled at the stress she laid on it. "I was too pleased to see you again to have a mind for anything else."

A lovely flush mantled her cheeks and brow.

"You ought, you ought," she repeated.

"But why?" I cried. "What difference in the world could it make to you, Cicely?"

She shook her head playfully, and smiled with an air of mystery.

"Ah!" said she, "that you may not know; but a great, a very great difference."

I put out my hand and captured one of hers. I had to release it upon the instant, for the door creaked upon its hinges. I had, for my part, completely forgotten Kesgrave, close as he was behind me. He was now announced, and came into the room. He greeted Cicely, then turned to me, and I saw an involuntary shade cross his brow. It was my brow, I think, upon which the shade should have been, considering how he had interrupted me. Mistress Plumer now joined us, and the conversation fell upon Rushmere and the previous day's party.

"And you had a number of officers present, I hear," said Mistress Plumer.

"Yes, madam," I replied, "quite a squad of them."

"An awkward squad," laughed Kesgrave, taking a pinch of snuff scornfully.

"Were they not pleasant company?" asked the elder lady.

"Why, no; not over and above, madam," said he. "They were a trifle too quarrelsome over their wine."

"With whom did they quarrel, my lord?" she asked.

"Chiefly with that old heart-of-oak, Commodore Cliffe," he said, laughing; and he proceeded to sketch the scene. He did it lightly and gaily; but the two ladies looked uneasily at me. The Commodore had quarrelled with people before, and I had been dragged in as thirdsman; and when the Earl finished by hinting that there had been a lively scene over the wine, both Cicely and her mother showed some concern.

"All's well that ends well," I remarked. "The disputes have been completely settled, and the disputants parted good friends in the end."

"Indeed?" said Kesgrave. "Nothing yet in hand?"

"Absolutely nothing," said I.

He thought he was speaking in a fashion sufficiently guarded; but he was ignorant how well the two ladies understood the Commodore and his ways, and again a shade came over his brow when he saw the manifest relief shown by my old friends. He dismissed the subject, and began to talk easily, delightfully, charmingly, upon other topics. I had no share in it, for he discoursed largely on things to be seen abroad, and I had been no farther than Paris, save for a short trip to Lisbon. However, he spoke so well and justly that I could admire if I could not match his stories.

To Mistress Plumer this discourse was interesting beyond most; for, being, by her delicacy, much shut up, she heard with the more pleasure of things so far away and different from her quiet country life. Her husband had been abroad in his day, and a large cabinet at one end of the room contained many curious things he had collected and brought home with him. Some of these she wished to show my Lord Kesgrave, and he attended her thither.

"Why did you leave the army?" said Cicely to me, in a low voice.

"Because I would be neither art nor part in the detestable business that is going forward," I replied.

Her face shone, and she smiled on me again. It was not long that we were able to chat on our old footing, for the Earl soon edged his way back to us, and the conversation became general. Then the clock ticking in the corner caught my eye, and I remembered that in half an hour I ought to be in my business-room, for a number of tenants had pressed for the settlement of the score of odd matters which stand over awaiting the return of the master of an estate. My adventure with the fugitives had greatly cut short my time, and now I felt it. However, there was nothing for it but to make my adieux. As I was doing so Kesgrave said:

"Oh, Mr. Ferrers, I am giving a little entertainment at Greycote on Tuesday next. I should be very happy if you would honour me by attending it, supposing you have no other engagement."

I had none. I suspected Cicely would be there, and I accepted. He named the hour of meeting, and I took my departure. At the door was a man in Kesgrave's livery of white and scarlet, holding a horse. I glanced at him carelessly, then looked closer in surprise. It was Kesgrave's face which was turned towards me; his eyes looked coldly and impudently into mine. Were there two Kesgraves,—one within making his bow to the ladies, one without in livery holding his double's horse? The man before me turned his glance aside, and stared out indifferently over his horse's ears. I marked him more attentively, and saw that he was a bigger man than the Earl, broader, more heavily built, though the likeness in features remained wonderful and surprising beyond ordinary.

My horse was brought, and I rode away, marvelling how the Earl came to have a servant who could easily pass for himself; but I soon slipped away into happy musings upon the delightful change back to the old Cicely. Why had she been so cold as long as she suspected me of being a King's officer? I put it down finally to her sympathies being with the country-folk against James; and though that seemed too slight a reason, yet I could find no better. Let it pass; she now smiled upon me as of old. What mattered aught else?

I entered upon the heath, riding swiftly, and saw a pillar of blue smoke rising in the shelter of a holly thicket. Who was here? I felt uneasy for the poor

folk I had stowed away in the ash coppice. Were the soldiers beating the heath? I cleared the thicket and breathed a sigh of relief. A pot swung from three sticks over the fire, two black tents were set up close at hand, and four figures were seated about the blaze. Only Egyptians; and the Lees, too. Nothing to fear from them.

Jasper Lee sprang to his feet and came rapidly towards me as I rode up to them. He was a tall, wiry old fellow, burned very dark by the sun, and dressed, for an Egyptian, very respectably; with large gold rings in his ears, and an air of prosperity which belied his shabby tents and rough little ponies. He was an old acquaintance of mine, and had made periodical visits to the heath as long as I could remember. He was knowing to a miracle about horses, and had cured a splint in the very animal I was now riding. He came forward, saluted me with a smile, and ran his hand over the place he had doctored.

"I don't think there's much the matter now, Jasper," said I, drawing up.

"No, Captain," he replied; "sound as can be. Is there aught I can do for you?"

"Not that I know of, Jasper," I answered. "All the cattle are sound in wind and limb. I've been trying them over this morning."

He nodded and smiled, and pulled off his hat again; and I rode on, receiving a cheerful greeting from the group around the fire: his wife, a withered old Romany,

sucking at a little black pipe; and his children,—Ursula, a tall, bright-eyed Romany lass of twenty, and young Jasper.

It is, I know, a strange confession that I was on friendly terms with these people, whom everybody threatened with whipping-posts and stocks, and chased out of a parish as though they brought a pest with them; but the Lees were of a superior order to many of their race, and somewhat privileged. It arose in this manner: Many years before, when Cicely's father was alive, he rode one day to Romsey, and Cicely and I were permitted to ride with him. In the town we came upon a crowd about a whipping-post, with Jasper Lee firmly tied to it. The officer was just rolling up his shirt-sleeves, the heavy whip with its knotted scourges already clenched in his hand, his coat and hat delivered to a bystander. Cicely had begged her father to interfere and save the poor fellow, and Squire Plumer, a good-natured man, made enquiry into the matter. Some linen had been stolen, and, upon search, only the encampment of the Lees could be found in the neighbourhood. There was no proof that Jasper had been concerned in the theft; but he was a gipsy, and an example must be made; so he was dragged into the market-place and strapped up. Squire Plumer's interposition saved him, and Jasper never forgot it, nor to whom it was due. Whenever their tents were pitched near Great Barrow he would wait about until he had seen Cicely, when he would fill her hands with quaint

presents, and his delight was beyond words when Squire Plumer permitted him to break and train ponies for her riding. Cicely and I being great companions, some portion of his regard was extended to me, and so it remained.

CHAPTER V

AT GREYCOTE

I WILL now pass on to next Monday afternoon, when the first step on my part was made into the queer tangle of events which followed. About three o'clock I started to provision my young folks in hiding. I took food for a couple of days, since to-morrow I should be away at Greycote.

I went by secret heath-ways to the ash coppice, and pushed back the door of my hut. Hester Blake sat near the bed improvised of dry fern and my riding-cloaks, holding her husband's hand. He was asleep. She glanced round as I came in, and smiled. She had known food and sleep herself in the interval since I first saw her, and now looked very different from the wild, hunted, starved, brave little creature who had tottered through the ferns with her husband on her back. As I set the basket down Robin Blake opened his eyes and smiled at me also. He was still very weak, but his delirium had passed, and he knew me well by this time.

"How now?" said I, taking his other hand.

"Doing bravely, squire," he whispered. "I feel twice the man I did yesterday. You have been good to us beyond dreaming."

"Never mind about that," said I. "Let us only get you on your legs, and I'll engage to slip you out of the country safe and sound."

He gave me another grateful look, and I handed over the basket.

"Now, Mistress Blake," said I, "here are your stores for a couple of days. I shall not be at home to-morrow, but I don't think you'll starve before Wednesday."

The invalid gave a little quavering laugh at this fine jest, and Hester Blake hastened to thank me and place the supplies in a rude cupboard which the turf-cutters had made in the hut.

While I sat by Robin and talked with him, she cleared the basket and busied herself about the place, which in some extraordinary fashion, and without any visible aid of furniture or ornament, she had transformed into a neat and home-like little dwelling, trim and clean. I did not stay long, for I had several matters on my hands, so took my basket and left them.

The weather was fine and warm, the hut was dry and snug, and both had declared they never had such easy hearts since Sedgemoor. Robin had nothing to do now but get well as quickly as possible. From the ridge beyond the coppice I glanced back, and was pleased to mark how completely hidden was their retreat. No one who did not know for certain would dream of a hut being there. At this instant a faint sound of dogs giving tongue came down the wind. I pricked my ears and listened; then faint and far I heard a view-halloo.

Sometimes, though very rarely, a party of riders after a hare would come this way, and I turned, half in a mind to go back and warn the fugitives to keep close lest a chance eye should espy something. From this point I commanded the whole of the ash coppice, and now I perceived a figure among the farther trees. I looked closely, and saw that it was Hester Blake. She held an earthern pitcher left in the hut by the turf-cutters, and was going to the spring I had shown her on the other side of the wood. Up here I heard the view-halloo again, nearer and clearer. Down there she heard nothing, and the hunt was on her side. I tossed my basket into the bushes near at hand and ran back to the top of my speed to warn her. I did not shout, for people might be nearer than I knew. I darted down the hill, up the bank of the coppice, past the hut, and through the trees after her. I found her at the spring, her pitcher just filled. Her large dark eyes stared with terror when I ran up, breathless from my fierce spurt.

"Back to the hut quickly," I whispered. "I have heard the sounds of dogs and men hunting."

She gave a little gasping cry and began to run, fleet as a deer. I ran beside her, listening eagerly, for I knew the beat, and could tell by the cry where the newcomers lay.

The dogs must have been running quietly for a time, since they opened again much nearer.

"Stop," I said; "they are coming down the ride

through the wood. We shall run into them; we must hide in this bush and let them pass. They will be gone in an instant."

"Robin, Robin," she murmured.

"He will be quite safe," said I; "they will never dream of turning aside to the hut. They will not see it, and in all probability know nothing of it."

She said no more, but pressed in among the tall brake to the shelter of a clump of low-hanging firs, and I followed her, for I was unwilling anyone should suspect a sign of life in the neighbourhood. I set my face to an opening in the branches and watched the ride. In a moment a flying hare leapt into sight, and close upon its haunches a couple of brace of dogs. Now for the riders! The thud of pounding hoofs became distinct, when, suddenly, just as I expected to see the horsemen sweep down the ride, I heard them at my back. They had been thrown out a little, and were passing us on the side I had not expected to see them. I turned my head apprehensively, for on that flank the cover was by no means so complete. They were already past,—Commodore Cliffe, Sir Humphrey Lester, and Mr. Pylcher, a neighbour of the Commodore's. Had they seen us? Mr. Pylcher, I felt sure, had not, for he was holding himself high in his saddle, and pointing eagerly with his whip to the flying chase. The Commodore and Sir Humphrey had a much more suspicious air; their faces were set so straight and so rigidly non-observing. However, I was safe in their hands. On

dashed the party, apparently mindful of nothing but their sport, and I breathed freely again. They were lost among the trees in an instant, and we ran for the hut.

I left Hester Blake to go in alone, for it would be dangerous to give her husband an inkling of the risk which had been run, and went on to the ridge and fished out my basket. Here I saw the riders far away across the heath, and still galloping madly. Then I turned my face towards home.

Next day I set off for Greycote in a light travelling-carriage with a pair of horses. This was not my usual way of moving about the country, for, as a rule, I loved a saddle under me; but the truth must be told, and it is that I had made a toilet too fine for horseback and heavy boots. My baggage had arrived from London by the stage-waggon, and I turned over all the finery I possessed to make as brave a show as possible. I had a new suit of plum-coloured velvet embroidered with silver, very rich and handsome, and I wore this, with high-rolled silk stockings, a large, new white peruke, ruffles and cravat of lace, and gold buckles on my shoes. I am not in love with the character of a fop, but I had a fancy to make the best figure I could of it in my rival's house. The roads were good in the fine weather which prevailed, and I arrived at Greycote with my splendour undimmed. Thereat I was satisfied, for it did not matter how crumpled I might get going back.

I entered the house, and found my Lord Kesgrave within the great hall receiving his guests and welcoming

them with his splendid air, at once so easy and so graceful. As he came to meet me I saw his deep lustrous eyes fire, and he looked me up and down with more attention than I had yet received from him. We exchanged bows and civilities and stood talking for a few moments until he was called away to a group of fresh arrivals, and I moved on to greet acquaintances already there. Presently I saw the person I was looking for. In a deep window-seat sat Cicely and the Commodore talking gaily together. I went towards them, and the Commodore looked up and Cicely smiled.

"Here's George," said the old sailor. "He's as gay as a picture."

Cicely smiled again and moved aside a fold of her white gown to make room for me to sit down beside them. She was the picture: youth and beauty at their richest flower.

"There's that confounded Hampton," growled the Commodore, as the squire bustled by. "As sure as I live, I was inclined to break the peace yesterday. I was riding out to meet Humphrey when I came across him and a couple of constables dragging a poor half-starved wretch to jail, a rebel about as dangerous as a rabbit. I had a good mind to strike in and take the poor fellow out of their hands, but I bethought myself in time."

"They ought to be satisfied now," said I; "jails are filled to overflowing."

"If they could lay every man-jack of Monmouth's seven thousand by the heels they'd be the better pleased,

I believe," said he. "By all that I can hear, our host of to-night is bitten a little with the prevailing maggot. His keepers have laid hands on four or five fugitives in different parts of his estate, and seen them safe into Ramsey clink."

"Kesgrave?" said I. "Why should he trouble to hunt the poor rogues down?"

"Court favour, I suppose," replied the Commodore. "It's a wind to which many and many a sail's being trimmed in this affair; and the servants would scarce be so busy in the matter were not the master willing."

"True," I remarked.

"For my part," said Cicely, "I think there was enough and to spare of punishment at the time of the battle. The King's party won. Why cannot they be satisfied with that? This filling of the jails with all sorts of persons, innocent and guilty, is not punishment; it is revenge, and that of a mean kind, seeing it is taken not on the leaders, but on the poorer sort, who are, of themselves, harmless enough."

The Commodore smiled and snapped his fingers.

"Revenge is the word, of course," said he; "such a revenge as will terrify discontented folk into silence."

At this moment my Lord Kesgrave came up to us, and the conversation halted perforce. He was followed by Major Ryecroft, who had been left in the neighbourhood with a detachment, though all his comrades had marched away. He did not meet me easily and frankly, as one might have expected considering that all scores

had been cleared up. He was somewhat stiff and constrained, and after the exchange of a few civilities, hastened to join himself to another group.

"Takes a licking very badly, George," whispered the Commodore in my ear. "No sweet blood in him; he'd do you mischief if he could."

I laughed carelessly, little thinking I was to be pinched shortly between my enemy and my friend as between the upper and the nether millstone.

Just as the Commodore began to whisper, Cicely moved away to speak to an acquaintance, and Kesgrave attended her instantly. She went forward again, and he kept at her side. I had lost my chance for the moment.

"He's a fine figure of a man, too," remarked my companion, nodding towards the Earl.

"What an odd thing is the striking resemblance his servant bears to him!" I remarked.

"Half-brother," returned the Commodore; "wrong side of the blanket. Colin Lovel they call him. His mother was the forester's daughter on this estate. Both of them are the very image of the old Earl, and so come to be like each other. A queer fancy, though, to entertain him as a body-servant."

"It is," I agreed.

I rose now and strolled after the company, who, for the most part were going out into the gardens, the day being warm and serene. It was some time before I could place myself beside Cicely again; but at last

some late arrivals engaged the Earl, and I promise you I was too close at hand for anyone else to forestall me. It was not long ere I managed to draw her away from the group which had been walking together, and we turned into a broad easy path, beside which a close-cut box-hedge ran on either side. As we went on the hedge grew taller and taller, until I could not see over it; the walk grew narrower, and did not seem to lead anywhere. After a while I became suspicious.

"Do you know what we have done?" I laughingly asked.

"No," said Cicely. "These are strangely narrow little walks we have been turning along."

"We have entered a maze, for a surety."

"A maze!" she said. "How can we get out?"

"Let us mark yon lofty trees," I returned, "and work in that direction. If that fails, I will scale a hedge and look over the ground."

We walked on again, laughing at the simple fashion in which we had allowed ourselves to be entrapped.

"Cicely," said I, "there is one thing which puzzles me beyond a little. Why did you scold me because as soon as I met you the other day I did not hasten to cry out I was no longer a King's officer? And why did you hold me at arm's-length—at arm's-length, do I say? I felt banished to the other end of the world."

She laughed softly and said, "I was in no mood to love the army. I am too foolishly fond of our own peo-

ple. Nor did you love it either, or you would not have given it up."

I smiled down at the beautiful face lifted up at my shoulder and replied, "But that is no answer at all. It ought to be a credit to me to dislike the doings of the army, from your point of view, and yet you punish me for it."

"But how did I know you were behaving so well?" she said, her large dark eyes full of delicious laughter. "It comes back to the old point. You ought to have said at once, 'Miss Plumer, I no longer serve the King. I am once more a private gentleman, bound to lift a finger or not, just as I please, in this wretched persecution of misled country-folk.'"

"Just as if that were likely," said I. "I never dreamed of such a thing as beginning to chatter about myself in the first delightful moment of seeing you again. My heart seemed to jump up and say, 'Cicely,' and that was all I knew."

A lovely rose-flush crept over her face.

"You are excusing yourself more cleverly than ever I knew you to do before," she said, lightly. "Quite in the latest London fashion, I feel sure. As if you had not seen me plenty of times!"

"Cicely," said I, "I have never been so long without seeing you as this last absence, and it seemed years and years since we parted. It was no trial to me to lay down my commission, I assure you. I was heart-glad to drop the wearisome routine of my duties——"

"In London," she broke in, "full of fashion and pleasure?"

"The Londoners are welcome to it," I went on. "I could have carolled like a bird when I was free to strike away along the great west road towards you, Cicely; for I love you dearly."

It was out. I had blurted out my secret, and, for an instant, was silent. We had come to a standstill, and she was now looking down and as pale as before she was rosy.

"Yes," I went on. "Now, Cicely, you know the truth. When I turned that corner and saw you coming, I felt that I had reached home, for all the way I knew that I was aiming to reach you, and you alone, and that my only hope was that you would not send me away."

She still said nothing, but let me take her hand.

"Poor George!" she whispered; then, laying her soft, delicate fingers on my big brown hand, and stroking it gently, "and I was so harsh to you."

"And you love me a little?" I asked, eagerly.

"Oh, yes, a little," she said, with a tiny strained laugh which was half a sob.

"Enough to marry me?" I pressed.

"Yes," she said.

"Oh," I cried, "I have loved you all my life!"

"And I, too," she whispered.

I threw my arms about her, and turned her pale, lovely face up to mine. Click! click! Heels rattled on the gravel path near at hand, and I released her

instantly. Did ever disturber come at so inopportune a moment? We turned swiftly and strolled on, hearing the steps behind approach nearer and nearer.

"Have you discovered that you have entered a maze?" said my Lord Kesgrave just at my shoulder.

"I had begun to suspect it, indeed," I replied, as easily as I could, turning to meet him. Had he seen anything? His face was as white as the cravat at his throat; his great bright eyes had the shine of a polished corselet; his long, slender fingers were coiling and uncoiling about the golden hilt of his sword. What matter? I had as much right, surely, as he to do my best to win my old companion. I had nothing to fear either from his rivalry or his anger now. She loved me. I had the word of the truest girl in the world. My heart was at ease.

"It was planned to entrap people as it snared you," went on Kesgrave. "The broad, easy path winds in and about until you are fairly caught. I happened to notice you entering, and promised myself the pleasure of releasing you, for it is by no means the simplest of tasks to find the way out without the clue. It was but yesterday I learned it myself, studying, for want of better employment, the plan which hangs in the hall."

The Earl placed himself on the other side of Cicely, and we continued to move forward. Under his guidance the maze was quickly threaded, and we came out on the other side at a point where the gardens were quite empty. The dinner-bell began to ring, and we

sauntered back to the house. Here, at an open window, stood Sir Humphrey and Lady Lester, with Mistress Plumer.

Cicely joined her mother, and I greeted the Lesters, whom I had not seen before. There was an odd touch of distance about Sir Humphrey which puzzled me for an instant, till I remembered how Hester Blake and I had hidden in the thicket yesterday. He had seen us, then! Never mind; I was safe in his hands. I had only to tell him how matters stood, and he would be silent upon what he had seen. The Commodore, too. The queer complexion which I afterwards found this adventure wore in the eyes of my friends never occurred to me for a moment. This I can honestly declare. The whole thing was so simple and straightforward in reality—that is, supposing a man to have a grain of compassion in his nature—that I never thought of the look such an affair would wear to folks who knew nothing of my reasons and the poor fugitives' distress.

A servant brought a message to Kesgrave, and he was called away. As he went, the whole party moved into the room upon which the window opened, the elder people first, Cicely and I behind. She was a little in front of me, and was carrying one hand at her back. I looked longingly at the tiny white palm and the pretty curved fingers with their rosy nails. Then a sudden fancy took me hotly. I slipped a ring from my finger and pressed it into the little hand. The colour came up her neck as her fingers closed over it, and she

drew her hand forward. In another instant it came back, this time held like a cup, and pointed towards me. In the hollow, resting on the delicate crumpled skin, lay a tiny gold circlet set with pearls. I knew it well. It was her favourite ring, warm from her finger, and I lightly drew it from its nest. The exchange was barely effected when a stream of guests flowed in upon us from a door near at hand, and we were parted. I drew aside a little, for I was in no humour to exchange careless gossip, and besides, I had to find a safe place for my precious treasure. In both cases wearing was a thing out of the question. My smallest finger-tip would scarce show itself through the little hoop, for I made a secret trial, though knowing beforehand it was hopeless; and my ring on Cicely's finger would be like that of the bride in the ballad of "The Wedding." The verse went through my head as I stood there.

CHAPTER VI

THE COMMODORE DOES ME AN ILL TURN

WHEN we went in to dinner I was nowhere near Cicely. I had expected as much, for I knew Kesgrave was my rival. I said this to myself, then corrected the speech. Had been my rival; that was the way to put it. The matter was now settled once for all, and I took my partner and my dinner contentedly.

After dinner there was to be a dance; but it did not begin at once. The garden was delightful in the cool of the evening, for the day had been very warm, and in twos and threes and scattered groups the company was dispersed along the smooth paths, and over the close-shaven sward, and beside the splashing fountains. The click of bowls came from the green, and thither I strolled, for the Earl was not now to be dislodged from the side of my mistress. I leaned upon the balustrade which overlooked the green, and watched the game for some time. The Commodore was playing, having deserted the bottle at an hour unusually early for him. Still, he did not entirely neglect his favourite diversion, for presently he called a passing servant, and bade him fetch wine and glasses, and place them in a little arbour at the end of the green. Here he seated himself, periwig in hand, and mopped his head, and

took frequent bumpers in the intervals of the game. After a while he gave over his attempts to play, and devoted himself entirely to the little arbour and the bottle.

Glancing round, he saw me leaning upon the wall, and, raising his glass, he cried out, "Ah! ah! Master Sly Dog, I drink to you," and, with a leer of infinite meaning in my direction, he emptied his glass. As he did so, Lady Lester and Major Ryecroft walked up and stood near him. The Commodore called out again:

"No more of your grave airs, Master Sly Boots. I've run you to earth. Ah, sister! little you know what a rogue your favourite is—your pink of good boys."

A feeling of lively apprehension sprang up in my mind. The Commodore in his cups would burst out with anything anywhere; and what was he about to say now? He lowered his voice to a thick, flustered tone, and began to laugh and snap his fingers and wink at his listeners. I could not make out what he said; but in a moment Major Ryecroft looked at me with a malicious smile, and Lady Lester reddened. My very heart stood still. Here was a rude awakening from the careless golden dreams of a moment back. Major Ryecroft, of all men, to hear the Commodore's tipsy maunderings! My mind ran like fire along the track laid but too plainly for it. The suspicions of this bloodhound—this flogger of women—aroused, his drawing of the cover, the finding of the unfortunate young people, and what then? The jail and the gallows rose

before my eyes, a swift and shameful death—I, who had been filled with so serene and sweet a contentment but an instant ago. The earth which hides the bones of dead men seemed to yawn before me, and, at a stride, I had come to the edge of the grave, and saw the pale kingdoms of Death among which my place was now appointed. And Robin Blake and Hester? Had the heroic struggles of that undaunted little woman for her loved partner come but to this end? Ah, the pity of it!

"Now, sister," crowed the Commodore, "what think ye of Sir Graveairs, your pet, now?"

"I think, Richard," said Lady Lester severely, "that you have drunk too much wine, and scarce know what you are saying."

"Don't believe me, eh?" cried her brother. "Well, will ye credit Humphrey? He was with me; he knows, ask him." He stopped speaking, filled out for himself a large glass of wine, took it off heartily, then began to sing an old country ditty:

> "I met a fine lass on a sunshiny day,
> And we were both young and handsome, I say."

He broke off and pointed to me, where I stood rooted to the ground, fearing to make matters worse by interference, yet unable to leave the place.

"Look at him," said the Commodore, "the big splendid fellow. What the devil, sister! would ye have skim-milk in his veins?"

"Richard, I am ashamed of you!" cried Lady Lester.

"Many's the time ye've said that, too," he replied, nodding at her with drunken gravity; "yet I am but telling what I saw and what Humphrey saw. A big, strapping, black-eyed wench, too."

Major Ryecroft chuckled and Lady Lester reddened, more and more angry. For the first time I saw eye to eye with the Commodore, and at the bare idea that the meeting was believed to be one of vulgar intrigue, so great was the revulsion of feeling at seeing them in error, that I laughed aloud. The Commodore continued his song:

"Says I, 'Pretty miss, will you give me a kiss?
Come, be kind; 'tis a thing that you never will miss.'"

Lady Lester turned upon me a face of mingled surprise and sorrow, and at that moment, for my sins, Sir Humphrey came up on my right.

"Here he is!" cried the Commodore, now too warm with wine and his sister's opposition to heed anything. "Come, brother;" and in a very round and broad fashion he demanded of him a statement of what they had seen, and the opinion they had formed on the matter. Sir Humphrey turned and walked away without answering a word.

"There!" cried the triumphant Commodore, "what d'ye think now, sister? Humphrey without a word to say, and Master George as dumb as a stock-fish."

My overstrained nerves shook me from head to foot, and I laughed again—a harsh, jangled laugh. I was dominated by one idea, their escape and mine.

"Hark at him laughing," said the Commodore, in a tone of great enjoyment; "the shameless young dog!"

An indignant denial leapt to my lips, but did not pass them. Major Ryecroft's presence froze my speech. If it was not what the Commodore suggested, what was this affair? A thing which would point the Major to his prey like a sign-post. What a triumph for him to carry me into Winchester with my feet bound together under the belly of a troop-horse! Nor me alone. Robin and Hester Blake laid their fingers on my lips.

Lady Lester was looking at me with a face of strange concern. Stay; was she looking at me? No. The glance passed me and travelled on, and I turned my head. I drew a deep, trembling breath. At the mouth of a pleached alley leading from the green to the garden stood Cicely and Kesgrave. How much they had heard I knew not; but Cicely's hand was pressed tight to her bosom, her face was as white as her dress. A subtle, mocking smile shone in my Lord Kesgrave's eyes. Even as I turned my head she moved away, and her companion followed her. For my part, I sought Sir Humphrey at once. He was walking alone, luckily, and in a dozen swift words I explained the situation.

"My dear lad," he murmured, in a genuine alarm, "what have you been doing? This is worse and worse. You must by now be a marked man among those in authority, and they will be merciless with you if this comes to light."

"I know all that, sir," I replied. "It went through my mind in a flash when I came upon the unfortunate people; but, had you seen the brave little soul, almost at her last gasp, yet dragging her helpless husband along in hopes of a hiding-place, you would have done no less."

"'Tis true that to live safely now one must banish compassion from his nature," returned my old friend, shaking his head. "Well, well, this mischief's done, but do you get them off your hands as speedily as possible. I'll go at once and silence Richard. 'Tis unlucky he has said so much. Who knows what maggot may be working in Major Ryecroft's brain already?"

He departed upon his friendly errand without delay, and I rambled on through the gardens, but not far. My mind was soon made up. I turned and walked swiftly back towards the house. I would seek Cicely, and never leave her side until I had an opportunity of whispering to her. With what fables might not her ear be poisoned?

The sounds of music floated to me as I drew near the windows opening on the lawn. The greater part of the company had gone within, and dancing was now in progress. I entered the first room and found it deserted. I went on, and came to a small chamber lying between the first apartment and the ball-room, and here I paused. This place, too, was empty, but through a half-open door I could see the dancers and the company filling the spacious apartment with a

bright, joyous crowd. I searched the various groups through and through with my eye in vain. Suddenly, behind me I heard the silken rustle of draperies. I turned my head and started with delight. It was Cicely herself, advancing to the door at which I stood, and alone.

"Cicely," said I, and touched the door with my foot, shutting it softly. We were cut off from the rest of the company. She came up to me steadily and swiftly, her tall, slim figure held proudly erect, her lovely face showing not a trace of colour, the soft, deep velvet of her eyes lustrous with unshed tears, the full scarlet of her tender lips a-quiver, wounded pride and maiden dignity in every line of her graceful figure.

"My ring," said she, quickly, and held out her hand.

"Cicely," said I, "listen to me for an instant," and I attempted to take her hand. She avoided me.

"My ring!" she said, imperiously; and there was such lofty command in the rigid tone that I mechanically drew out the tiny circlet which had been lying between forefinger and thumb all the time. She had made a sudden, swift movement, and I had lost it. Something tinkled at my feet, and she was gone. I looked down, and saw my own ring lying on the polished floor.

I picked it up and retraced my steps to the front of the house. It was clear now that she had heard all. She had heard the coarse insinuation which the Com-

modore bellowed like a bull. She had seen Sir Humphrey confirm it by his manner. She had heard no reply to it but a laugh. A pretty thing that! The man who an hour or two before had declared that he had loved her all his life now made no answer to a shameful accusation save by a laugh!

For half an hour or more I strolled on the terrace, then sought the ball-room by another entrance. By the mocking and quizzical glances cast at me I knew the story was on the wing. Indeed, I saw Squire Hampton bustling from group to group, and Major Ryecroft equally busy. Wherever they went women tittered, men laughed aloud, and eyes were turned in my direction. My blood began to rise. The Major slipped in among a group of three or four men, and they began to grin and stare at me. I crossed towards them. They faced me and laughed out loud.

"Gentlemen," said I, "this conduct is somewhat scurvy, to laugh at a man to his face. Will not one of you explain the reason?"

"Faith, Ferrers," said an old gentleman among them, frankly, "there is a funny story about you going the rounds. To be sure, the story is common enough about other folks, but about you it has the merit of novelty."

"I thank you, Mr. Somers," said I. "You are very kind, for you give me the opportunity of saying that it is my intention to soundly cane any gentleman who relates funny stories about me."

I looked full at the Major, but he affected to be

quite unconscious of my meaning; the others cleared their throats and looked at the dancing with great interest. Mr. Somers laughed.

"Well," said he, "that's fair enough. The story's about you, so you've a right to object. I'm not going to repeat the story. Not that I'm afraid of the caning, for I've known you since you were a little boy. The rest must look after themselves."

The rest looked after themselves by saying nothing at all; but at this moment Sir Humphrey pulled my sleeve.

"George," he whispered as he drew me away, "leave the Major alone, can't you? What matters the story which amuses these fools? Doesn't it make you safer?"

"True, sir," I grumbled; "but a more patient man than I might be vexed at their impertinence."

"'Tis you patient fellows whom nothing can hold when once they flare up," replied my kind old friend. "Now go and talk to my wife. She wishes to speak to you."

Lady Lester was seated on a small divan in a window-nook. There was room for one more, and she motioned to me to take the vacant seat. The recess was empty save for ourselves, and we could talk freely.

"What have you been doing, George?" she said. "Sir Humphrey has told me something. It is very foolish of you."

For an answer I related the whole story.

"Poor things!" she said when I had finished. "It

is hard—terribly hard—on such poor creatures. But I wish they had fallen into the way of anybody but you."

I made no reply. My eyes were fixed upon a minuet which was going on before us. Cicely was walking through it with the Earl of Kesgrave for partner. Her lovely colour had returned; her eyes sparkled like jewels; she smiled radiantly; she stepped like a queen.

"It was unlucky that several of your friends overheard Richard's foolish talk," said Lady Lester, looking keenly at me. I reddened, for I knew very well what she meant, and she smiled. "However," she went on, "it can easily be put right. You will not mind Mistress Plumer knowing the story, I feel sure. You will be safe in her hands. I will tell her if you wish."

My fervent thanks brought a smile to her kind, shrewd eyes again, and then a party of her friends came up, and no further private talk was possible.

Presently I found myself at the lower end of the room leaning against a shelf which projected from the wall and held a row of marble vases. I was alone, and debating within myself whether it were wiser to leave the scene altogether or attempt to gain an interview with Cicely, when Kesgrave came slowly down the room in my direction.

To-night he was superb at every point. Enemy or friend, it must be allowed that he was a splendid figure. He wore a suit of palest, most delicate blue, embroidered with gold, the loops set with diamonds, which caught

the flames of the myriad tapers, and shot them back in rich, darting reflections of the most fiery, the most brilliant hues. His own abundant fair hair set off his delicate, haughty features as no periwig could; his tall, handsome figure and lofty mien—everything—marked him off from the crowd; and for once you saw a man whose appearance filled the eye as his title filled the ear.

As he drew near he met me with a full, bright eye bent on mine, an inscrutable look, a look behind which lay his purpose, as a buckler-player lies behind his shield. He came to a stand at my side. I waited for him to open the conversation, but for some moments he spoke not. Then amid a break in the throng we saw Cicely cross the room. 'Twas but for an instant she was in sight, yet the radiance of her beauty dimmed the brilliant crowd for me as when the sun peeps through shining clouds.

"Surely a more exquisite creature never breathed," murmured the Earl. "Are you superstitious?"

"I don't know," I said, wondering at this odd turn.

"I came down here," he went on, "marvelling at myself for making the trip. It is true I had not been near the place for many years. Still, it could have jogged along without my oversight as long again, I dare say. Yet I came; but no sooner had my eyes fallen on Miss Plumer than I knew my good genius and no other had drawn me to her feet."

"H'm," said I.

"She will be Countess of Kesgrave," said he quietly, his eye on mine. I smiled equably.

"All my life, Mr. Ferrers," he went on, "I have had the best of everything, and I have never seen a more beautiful—I have never seen a lady half so beautiful in all my travels. You smile again, and I think I know what is passing through your mind. Yes, I have arrived many and many a time at a place when the best seemed irrevocably promised to another. Yet I have had it. I am not a rival to be lightly reckoned with."

His brilliant, mocking eyes were bent on mine, but I smiled again.

"My Lord Kesgrave," said I, "I have known you as a rival since the first moment I saw you the other day. You believe yourself better equipped against me in the battle for a lady's favour; but in this case the struggle is over. It is true that you are an earl, while I am a simple gentleman; you have half a dozen estates, I one; you are richer and handsomer than I; yet your rivalry is useless and galls me not. It did; it does no longer." He laughed a gay and scornful laugh.

"For a man who has known something of court and camp you place a surprising reliance on a lady's word, Mr. Ferrers," said Kesgrave. "My own eyes taught me an hour or two back that at the present turn of the game you are several points ahead; but, believe me, I shall be on terms with you long before you regain the favour you have lost."

To this I had nothing to say, and in a moment he resumed:

"A promise! pooh! What's a promise where a woman is concerned? I have bought a promised woman over and over again. I have thrown dice for one, bloodied a foil for one. I have always had them."

"My lord," said I, "you will oblige me by not mentioning Miss Plumer in the same breath with ladies who are obtained by money, dice, or the sword. You have graduated in an evil school. You know not the worth of a true promise."

"And pray, in what school have you graduated?" asked Kesgrave, his face full of satirical amusement. "Has it ever occurred to you to rub these pious doctrines into yourself? From all I gather, if your divinity is not shining upon you, you find it quite easy to console yourself with a lesser light beneath the next hedge."

My patience took flight again, and a warm reply rose to my lips. It was checked by the appearance of Lady Lester, who came up, making some remark as she approached on the beauty of the vases near us. Kesgrave bowed and replied, and for some minutes they discussed them until a country-dance began to be formed in which Kesgrave was engaged. He went away in search of his partner, and Lady Lester turned to me.

"You two were quarrelling or about to quarrel," she said. "I was watching you, and for all your polite smiles at each other I knew very well where you stood. It isn't safe for you to turn awkward with any one at

present, George. You know that very well. I think you had better go home. The tangle will come out straight enough, never fear. Only, don't be rash."

"You are right," I said, "and you are kindness itself. After all, Kesgrave does a little rebel-catching. If he were willing to do me mischief it would be a handle of a thousand."

"You're sure he gained no hint?" she asked, anxiously.

"Not a word passed on the point," I replied. "The match was near the powder, 'tis true; but no more."

"I wish you were well away from here," she said; "I am in the greatest uneasiness."

"I promise you I will be wary," said I; "I will take offence at nothing."

"I had rather see you go," she replied, as a group of acquaintances came towards us.

I could not go. I might be foolish to stay, yet I was unable to tear myself from the scene. A chance might arise at any moment to speak to Cicely.

CHAPTER VII

THE CONSTABLES

I RAMBLED uneasily out again to the terrace before the house and paced slowly up and down. The night was mild and serene, the air filled richly with the perfume rising from the dewy garden, the silence profound. The harvest moon, to-night at the full, had cleared the darkling belt of eastern forest, and, quenching the stars in her queenly radiance, held alone in fee the blue, velvety spaces of celestial night. Bathed in her lovely light, tall, slender fountains tossed aloft thrice-whitened snow, their murmurous plash, the prattle of their guardian nymphs; garish day had chained the naiads in their basins, but now they had risen to whisper their secrets to each other in the moonlight. The broad white road below ran through dusky woodlands like a path of pearls crossing a field of ebony.

As I gazed upon the beauty of the night I became aware of the distant roll of wheels. I listened, and knew that a carriage was approaching from the road. I watched carelessly the turn of the avenue where the silvery path was swallowed among the trees, and presently the vehicle came in sight, rolling sluggishly. I set it down as belonging to some of the guests who were taking an early departure; but when it came near and

drew up within a few yards of the spot where I stood in shadow I was not so sure. It was a rude coach, creaking and grumbling as it rolled, and drawn by a pair of clumsy nags, far from matching each other. The driver was a clownish fellow in coarse homespun, and had in no point the dress or appearance of a gentleman's servant. Something plucked at my heart, and I disliked —I knew not why, yet I disliked—the look of this mean equipage drawing up before the splendid mansion. It was wretched enough; but it was not that. I felt in its presence a premonition of something forbidding, malevolent, sinister; as of a thing which had crawled out into the night for an evil purpose. The door was flung open, and a man stepped down. A second man followed him, and the driver turned on his seat.

"Here we be," said the driver.

"Ay, ay, at last," replied the first-comer from the vehicle, stretching himself. "Though there wor' naught else for it. If so be a party ain't at home, ye must follow un in our business."

"Jacob," said the second man, "will there be trouble, d'ye think? 'Tis as queer a job as ever I gied ye a hand in, to take a body from a place like this."

Jacob finished stretching, and dropped his arms smartly at his side.

"Trouble?" said he. "Not likely. I've got the warrant safe enough. An' 'twould be treason to lift a finger against us. There's magistrates and such-like

within there by the half-dozen, an' they'm bound to see me done right by."

Warrant! Treason! My conscience with a clap knitted the two words together, and showed me plainly enough what warrant it would be treason to withstand. Whose house was it they had drawn blank, and now pursued the person here? Had the Blakes been discovered? Had I been spied upon? I held myself rigid in the shadow and scarcely breathed.

"It's quiet enough in the front here," remarked the driver.

"Servants busy in their own quarters, I expect," replied one of the others, "an' the grand folks dancin' away. Hark at 'em."

Loud strains of music floated along the terrace, and the man named Jacob pointed to a brilliantly-lighted window at some distance.

"It sounds from there. I'm goin' to peep in," he said. He trod softly towards the place, and his companion followed him. The driver paid no attention to their movements, and did not attempt to descend. He slouched his hat over his eyes and sat lazily on his box. The light shoes which I wore enabled me to move noiselessly after the constables; I had seen in their hands the staves tipped with the crown which denoted their office. They were peering eagerly in at the window, which extended to the ground and opened like a door, and now stood slightly ajar to give air to the crowded ball-room. The shadow lay thick along the

wall and upon a bordering strip of close, soft grass. I drew near to the ill-omened figures, on whom fell the shine of candles from within.

"That looks gay," said the second man. "See, yonder's Squire Pylcher dancin' wi' a lady in red."

"D'ye see that fine-lookin' man in blue clothes yonder," said Jacob, pointing—"him wi' the gold-handled sword. That's the Earl of Kesgrave, an' the party we want's a-talkin' to him."

"Ay, Jacob Rapson," cried his companion in a voice of pity, odd to hear from a man of his profession. "What a thing we've to do!"

"It's got to be done, come what may," replied Rapson slowly, "though I like it as little as e'er a job I had in hand."

It was not I, then. They had marked their prey, and it was not I. I smile now when I think of that easy couple of minutes I spent leaning against the wall and breathing comfortably under the assurance that I need not fly, and that my poor friends were still safe. It was the last of my easy moments for many a day.

The men stepped closer to the window, and I strolled up and stood behind them. Who was it talking to the Earl of Kesgrave? I could not see, for the figure of a dance had just broken up and the upper part of the room was crowded with criss-cross, moving streams of talking, laughing people. I had never seen a London assembly more brilliant; the gay colours, the jewels, the dazzling country complexions shining out rich and

soft in the light of the hundreds of brightly burning tapers.

It would be a strange experience, I thought as I stood there, for the person who was to be fetched from that perfumed atmosphere, from the dainty silken rustle, the light laughter, the very pride of life, to be secured by the rude grip of these clowns, to be packed in yon musty vehicle with them for close companions, and jolt away for Winchester clink. I knew the jail, a foul, stinking hole, where the year before prisoners had been delivered without waiting for trial, since fever had broken out and made a clean sweep of the wretched inhabitants. It was said this fever still hung about the place, and I wished a thousand times I had been able to see who was in conversation with Kesgrave, so that I might have slipped round and given him the word to fly. Fresh faces came to view every moment in the swiftly, changing crowd, and now I saw Cicely walking with a young fellow named Lorrimer, whose estate joined mine to the northward. The colour she had worn in the minuet had faded away, she looked something less serene than usual, and I longed to speak to her and give her a hint of truth.

"Would that she might approach this way," I thought. "Perhaps I could slip to her side and get her to listen for an instant."

I was so absorbed at sight of her pale, lovely face that for an instant I did not observe that the head-constable was stepping into the room.

"Can it be Lorrimer?" I said to myself. "The man is going straight up to him."

But the fellow stopped and turned his head as if speaking to Cicely. The impudence of such a thing was all that came to my mind for a moment, and I stepped forward to interfere. Then a dreadful, chilling fear froze me, and I could not breathe, I could not move; for she went white as death, though the fire of her eyes never paled, and she drew herself up as one who collects every morsel of strength to meet a deadly blow.

Lorrimer was clamorous. "Nonsense! A mistake! What d'ye mean, man? Away!"

The constable, however, held his ground and drew out a warrant. He pointed his crown-headed staff towards her. I heard his words. "You are my prisoner," he said.

Then a great crowd swarmed round them, talking and crying out excitedly, and I rushed up, and for an instant could not make my way through them; but over their heads I saw the Romsey constable, cool-faced, watchful-eyed, and Cicely white and still. I tossed folks right and left and went in. Kesgrave arrived at the same time from the other side.

"What is this?" he cried, in deep, ringing tones of passion. "Off with you at once, or you shall be flung out like a dog."

The constable gave the Earl a dry, saturnine look; of the true English bull-dog breed, he was not to be cowed by anyone.

"I've got my duty to do," he said, "an' this young lady must come wi' me. It 'ud be as much as my place is worth—and my neck too, for aught I know—if I lose sight of her from this minute till she be lodged in Winchester Jail."

"Dare you bandy words with me?" cried Kesgrave. "Do you know to whom you speak?"

"Very well, my lord," replied the man. "But I never heard as your lordship wor' above the law.—Major Ryecroft," he cried, sharply, as he caught sight of the soldier, "I demand assistance from you, sir. 'Tis a rebellion job, this. The warrant against this young lady is for feedin' an' hidin' rebels. 'Tis no mistake anywhere. We've got the men, three of 'em. She's been seen time an' again carryin' food to 'em."

A terrible thrill shook every heart. Men groaned; women burst into tears. So young, so beautiful, undone by the kindness of an innocent heart touched at the sight of misery. Had she been accused of the worst crime in the calendar her future would have looked bright compared with the prospect before her.

Kesgrave had fallen still on this speech, and Major Ryecroft, biting his lip, looked on with bristling interest. Suddenly a shrill scream rang from the farther end of the room. Cicely knew it, turned, and pressed through the crowd which opened before her. She darted towards the couch upon which her mother had fallen, struck down by the news incautiously poured

into her ear. Several of the ladies followed her, and the constable looked round uneasily.

"Jacob Rapson," said Sir Humphrey, coming up with an uneasy face, "what's this warrant I hear talk about? Let me see it at once."

"Cert'nly, Sir Humphrey," said the man, and produced the paper.

The old gentleman read it carefully. He sighed deeply and read it a second time.

"Now, Sir Humphrey," said Rapson, "'tis a sad business, and I like it no more than anybody else. 'Tis a sad blow to the young lady's mother, of course, an' I'm not one to drag 'em apart without time for good-bye or the like; but I look to be played fair wi'. You're a gentleman an' a magistrate, an' if you give me your word the young lady will be ready in half an hour, I'll give ye that half-hour an' wait where ye like. But if ye don't promise, I must take it ye're willin' to smuggle her off, an' then I must stick to her shoulder wherever she may go."

He stopped and ran his cool, unflinching eye round the breathless circle of us, then marked down Cicely among the flutter of women, and watched her steadily.

"If it was anything else in the world," said Sir Humphrey, his face as white as his ruffles, "something could be done, but——" He paused.

"Impossible," said Major Ryecroft, in a low voice, shaking his head. "It is my duty to support this man. If I gave you a glance at the orders we have re-

ceived——" He broke off in turn and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, gentlemen all," said the constable, "is it yes or no to what I said? Treat me fair, an' I'll treat you fair. I can't say more."

"Give her the half-hour, Jacob," said Sir Humphrey, slowly. "It is all that can be done."

"Very good, Sir Humphrey," replied Rapson. "I look to you to surrender the young lady then."

As he turned aside and paid no more attention, Mrs. Plumer was borne from the room, her head supported in Cicely's arms.

The circle broke up, and I seemed to wake from a trance. I was trembling from head to foot, and my heart fluttered oddly as if a hand was pressing it into a corner, as one catches a bird in a cage. I have known ever since that moment what deadly fear means. I got out into the moonlight again, and the night-air seemed bitter chill to my face, heated by the mad rush of my blood. Cicely to be swept into this dreadful, all-devouring net; the sweet, delicate flower of her youth and beauty to languish in the foul air of a jail! Must she stand in the felon's dock before the vile, debased Jeffreys? I knew the man well, his low manner of life, his contempt for the justice he was supposed to represent, his openly-avowed eagerness to ingratiate himself with the King, who could find no better instrument wherewith to slake his sullen greed of blood.

My eyes fell on the mean carriage and the driver drowsing on his box.

"Come," thought I, "something must be done. A truce to gloomy reflection. How? How? How?"

This word seemed to repeat itself in letters of fire before my eyes, as I cudgelled my brains for some plan to save my Cicely. I thought of this, thought of that, half saw my way here or there, perceived a fatal hitch, turned back, tried again, and meantime every pulse which throbbed in my wrists and straining temples seemed to cry out, "The seconds are flying; the minutes run together and fall. Haste! Haste!"

I looked at my watch and started in surprise. Of the half-hour, twenty minutes had gone. I snapped it to and thrust it back. I drew my sword and glanced along its keen edge, glittering blue in the silvery light. "I have it," I whispered aloud.

"Yes," said a voice at my shoulder; "there is no other plan."

I turned, and was face to face with Kesgrave. "You cannot go on foot," he went on. "Perhaps they would drive over you."

I laughed and waved my hand towards the pair of clumsy nags at the other end of the terrace.

"'Tis scarce likely," said I. "But how came you to divine my thoughts so surely?"

"Because I see no other way myself," he answered; "and the sight of your drawn sword showed me whither your mind had led you. But I come to propose that we

join forces. We will intercept the carriage, relieve the constables of their prisoner, and, together, hand the young lady over to her friends. It will be easy for them to hide her until there is a chance of making her peace, and then the field will be open for us once more. Let the doors of Winchester Jail once shut behind her, and she is lost for ever."

"'Tis a black prospect," said I.

"Ay," said Kesgrave, "blacker, perhaps, than you dream. Have you heard aught from Winchester?"

"No," said I. "I know Jeffreys is trying there."

"The man is a devil," said Kesgrave, slowly. "It is almost beyond belief. An old lady gave food to two rebels in all innocence, not knowing them to be such. He has sentenced her to be burned to death."

I repeated his last words in horror. "'Tis some ghastly joke," I said. "Never, never in this world can such a monstrous thing be."

"It is true," replied the Earl. "I had a packet from Winchester this afternoon. The hand which sent the news may be relied upon in all confidence."

I said nothing. The monstrous cruelty and wickedness of this sentence cooled and calmed me. I had been hanging in the wind between an instant attack and leaving the matter for powerful friends to bring influence to bear. A violent attempt miscarrying might rebound cruelly on the prisoner and destroy hopes of a more peaceful settlement. I had swayed backward and forward, now leaning one way, and now the other; but

this news bent and fixed the mind at a stroke. It justified the most desperate plan, the snatching at the frailest hope. My pulse fell steady upon the instant, my heart beat firmly and resolutely. I knew what must be done, and I rejoiced to see my way so clear.

"What do you propose?" said I.

"Horses, masks, and swords," replied Kesgrave.

"The first two I must borrow," was my reply.

"Everything is in train," he answered.

I started.

"Surely the secret is not general!" I cried.

"There are three of us in it," returned the Earl. "You, I, and my man Colin Lovel. I dare trust no one else. He is safe as myself. At first I thought of venturing with him alone, but I felt pretty sure your mind would be running that way, and it's better not to clash. We cannot afford to counter each other; and, besides, two might easily be too few. Yon constable is a cool, resolute fellow, and carries pistols. I saw his hand slip to his bosom when I stormed at him."

My Lord Kesgrave made a few steps, then glanced round as if he had been expecting me to follow him.

"Come!" he said. "Is it wise to stay? Is it not possible that you may make some slip which might ruin everything! I tell you that if the slightest suspicion be aroused, Ryecroft, Hampton, and half a dozen more will get to horse at once and accompany the carriage into Romsey, and to-morrow's journey will be in broad daylight. Where are we then? Some of these fellows,

in their greed for notice, would hand over their own mothers."

I knew that he spoke the truth, and followed him at once. We went swiftly round a near angle of the wall, and entered a small, private door which opened into a matted passage. The passage ended in a narrow staircase, and Kesgrave bounded up and I after him. A door at the head of the steps led into a large room, where a fire burned on the hearth, and half a dozen candles flared on a broad table. Beside the board stood Colin Lovel, a strip of black velvet before him and a sharp knife in his hand. He was busy cutting out masks, and two already shaped were tossed aside; farther down the table three or four swords were strewn, and a case of pistols stood open. Kesgrave walked swiftly over to a cabinet, and came back with a knot of thin, dark cord. He cut off several short lengths, and I caught up a couple and began to furnish my mask with strings.

"A sword," said Kesgrave, nodding to the weapons. "Is that a walking-rapier you wear?"

"No," I replied; "as good a bit of steel as ever was forged. I never wear but the one."

Colin Lovel nicked out the eyes of the third mask, fastened on a couple of strings while I fumbled at one, and drew the case of pistols towards him. A powder-flask lay at his side.

"No pistols," said I.

"We may be shot at," replied the man as coolly as

if he had been Kesgrave himself, and looking first at me, then at his master.

"You are right, Ferrers," said the Earl. "We dare not reply. To direct a sword is in a man's power, but a bullet is other guesswork."

Colin Lovel pushed the case aside and paid no further attention to the weapons. He went into a room opening from the one in which we stood, and returned with hats, riding-coats, and boots.

I threw aside my periwig and Kesgrave offered a bob, but my own hair was long enough, and I declined. I attempted to get into one of his riding-coats, but it was impossible, and I took a cloak to hide my bravery. Into a pair of boots I managed to squeeze my feet, but it was tight work. Without a periwig it was easy to fit myself with a hat, and I was ready. Kesgrave had been busy with the like preparations, and Colin Lovel had disappeared as soon as he had tossed the clothes on a table.

The Earl lifted his eyebrows and I nodded. There was no need for words. We returned to the matted gallery and opened the door. The clumsy vehicle moved away as we did so. We slipped into the corner, and I strained my eyes eagerly to catch a glimpse of Cicely, and I saw her, and saw a lady beside her. A score of large tapers had been carried out, and, in the serene air, their steady flames outshone the moon and threw a bright light into the departing coach.

"Lady Lester is going with her," I whispered.

"Excellent," murmured Kesgrave. "A most sensible lady, who will never be able to recollect aught certain about three desperate rogues."

For several yards, as the carriage moved slowly away, the light fell fully upon Cicely. I watched her pale, sweet face with a throbbing heart. I was as jealous as possible of Kesgrave and his man rendering assistance. I felt that I could have carried her off were her guards ten times as numerous and her strait ten times as desperate. I know that it was all very foolish, and that a single bullet from Jacob Rapson's pistol might easily have given me my *coup de grace,* leaving her, were I alone, helpless and hopeless; but who expects sense from a lover?

My Lord Kesgrave touched my shoulder, and I turned my eyes reluctantly from the moving prison and followed him. On this side the shadow lay thick and black, an ample covert. He led the way into a shrubbery, and thence to a grassy alley which ran along the edge of the garden. We passed under the gloom of tall trees and were lost to sight from the house at once, even had anyone been watching. Swiftly and silently we sped across the deserted pleasaunce, and came to a wicket-gate opening on the park. Here we heard a soft whinny and the muffled pawing of horses' feet on grass. Under the first tree sat a tall mounted figure, holding a horse in either hand.

"Up with you," cried the Earl, and we scrambled into the saddles. A broad glade, bathed in moonlight,

lay before us, and the spurs were clapped home. The spirited steeds needed not this signal for haste. They bounded furiously away, and across the smooth sward we swept like flying shadows of the night.

"With luck," said Kesgrave, "we ought to be back with the young lady in less than an hour. We are sure to be missed. What then? I'll take care nothing can be proved; and suspicion will do little against a man of my rank."

If he was careless of himself, I was doubly so of myself, and everybody was suited. On we flew, Colin Lovel leading the way a little.

"He knows the country," said Kesgrave. "Ran about here as a boy. He advises a place called Bracken Bottom."

"I know something of it, too," I added; "and he has hit the very place."

No more was said. I was in no mood for idle talk, and my Lord Kesgrave kept silent.

CHAPTER VIII

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

We rode by secret ways through lonely woodlands, sweeping along vast natural avenues which seemed to stretch illimitably before us, their sides fading away into a silvery mist, and leading to wilder and yet wilder sylvan solitudes. We threaded wide, moonlit alleys flanked by mighty secular oaks; on one hand towers of dusky shade shot with silver at the rifts in the foliage, on the other rich in mellow colour from ribbed roots to topmost leaf. A thicket of thorns twinkled before us, a faint grey shadow lay upon our path, then melted in the distance, flying faster even than we; so must the deer have fled before Arthur's knights as they rode through the woods of Lyonesse upon some faerie quest.

My spirits began to rise. It was impossible to feel hopeless on such a night, speeding smoothly, swiftly, over the velvet of the forest turf, the horse under me carrying my weight like a feather, the fresh mild air full of the forest scents beating strongly, sweetly, against my face. Youth and strength swelled up and declared that life was theirs to shape and make it as they willed; Hope turned her shining face on mine; we could not fail. There was a magic in the night. The

white thrill of the moon touched heart and brain. From old pagan windows of the past there blew upon me that divine air which the ancients called "the breath of the gods."

The sense of the full, abounding life which haunts every place where man is not, and which we call Nature, was stronger now than under the broad glare of noonday. The forest seemed alive with murmuring presences; one could fancy that Dryad whispered to Dryad from oak to oak—that secret worshippers offering those old mysterious rites to the Great Mother had slipped aside into the brake, warned by the swift rush of our trampling hoofs, and breathed confidences to each other as we passed. Amid such solitudes of venerable shade must the Bacchantes have danced their whirling dance in the shelter of Mount Cithæron; *Evoe, Evoe,* the cry would ring native to the night and to the scene. Amid such thickets lay Pentheus what time the angry, youthful god was luring him to his doom.

. . . . . .

On, on we sped, and gradually the trees began to thin and fall away. They dwindled to shrubs and clumps of brushwood and we were on a heath. A gaunt gallows-tree stood up in the moonlight and I broke the silence: "Shotley Corner." We drew rein and sat for a while listening. The night was silent as ever, and we heard nothing save a bittern booming in the wet flats below.

"We're in plenty of time," said the Earl in a low voice. "Which way does Bracken Bottom be?"

"This," said I, turning to the right, and they followed.

A short distance from the gibbet we paused on the crown of a descent. The road fell sharply into a dip of the heath, was hidden for a stretch of two hundred yards in a wood, then climbed out and up the farther slope.

"On horseback or on foot, the attack?" said Kesgrave.

"I should say on foot," I replied. "If we ambush ourselves in the nearer fringe of the wood they will be climbing a steep hill and cannot make a burst of it."

"True," he replied, "and a man is more his own master on foot."

We went down to the edge of the trees and dismounted. Colin Lovel took the horses into the wood and fastened them securely. I drew my mask from my pocket and tied it on. Kesgrave did the same. We made final arrangements as to each man's share of the attack, then became silent. The minutes dribbled slowly away, everyone seeming a quarter hour at least, when at last we heard a distant crunching among the flinty pebbles beyond the ridge. We drew back from the trees and saw a dark object push against the sky. In an instant the carriage began to rattle down the slope; we returned to cover and drew our swords. The moment was at hand and my heart began to beat faster and

faster. No, no, not an inch neared to Winchester clink should my love go. I gripped the hilt of my weapon, yet hoped there would be no need to fight; one never knows what may happen in a scuffle, blows and bullets going.

The horses dropped into a walk when the road began to rise, and the noise of their pounding feet and the grinding wheels sounded very loud and near. I peered out, but they were not yet in sight. Kesgrave and his man were on the other side of the road. I could just see them couched in shelter of a holly-bush. I put my head out a second time, and as I did so a most extraordinary hubbub arose in the hollow below. It was made by the horses drawing the carriage. I had been familiar with horses all my life, but never had I heard such noises as these now made. They were screaming horribly. I know no other word for it, screaming shrilly, dreadfully, and, by the sound of their feet, plunging madly. Then arose shouts of men, and next, a tremendous crash, followed by confused outcries, and through it all the horses screamed and screamed again. I leapt from my covert and ran down the road. Some accident had happened. The coach had overturned. Where were Cicely and Lady Lester? Kesgrave ran at my side. We were on the turf and made but little noise. We turned the corner and saw a dark heap in shadow below us. In an interval of the uproar we heard a clear, strong voice, a young man's voice, call, "Right, father!"

"Hallo," said I, "I know that voice."

We heard crashing through the underwood as if people were running away. Deep in the wood sounded a faint, shrill whistle, then crack, crack, went two pistol-shots.

We arrived at the spot to see the coach on its side, the driver lying three or four yards away, where he had been pitched from the box, the horses now quiet, but trembling all over. A head appeared at the window of the vehicle. It was Lady Lester. I ran to her and drew her out bodily and set her on her feet.

"H'm!" said that stout, resolute old lady. "Mask or no mask, it's George."

"Where is Cicely?" I cried. "And are you hurt?"

"I don't know," she said, "and I'm not hurt at all."

"Where are those fellows?" broke in Kesgrave.

"That I can't tell you, my Lord," replied Lady Lester. "But I fancy chasing the people who have carried off Cicely. I hope they won't catch anybody."

"Which way have they gone? Listen!" said I.

We listened, but there was no sound to guide us. They had taken to the turf and the silence was profound.

"How did it all happen?" asked the Earl.

"I know nothing," she replied, "except that the horses began to make a dreadful noise and plunge. Before we could open a door or do anything the carriage was turning over, and we were all in confusion. Next

I heard Jacob Rapson shout 'She's gone!' and out he scrambled, and the other man after him. Then I got to my feet and you came up."

"You don't know who stopped the vehicle?"

"I haven't the least idea in the world," answered Lady Lester. "But the hand must be friendly, and I'm glad of it. The next thing will be to keep her safely hidden."

The driver now sat up and began to rub his forehead.

"That fellow's coming to himself," remarked the Earl.

"Yes, and you must go," said Lady Lester. "Off with you before he sees too much."

"But you," I said. "What will you do?"

"It isn't half a mile to Shotley," she replied. "I shall walk there and stay at the rectory until to-morrow."

Voices now sounded from the wood, and branches clashed together as Jacob Rapson and his follower pushed their way back to the road.

"It is mere folly to stay here," she whispered.

"You are right," said I; "it will be best for you to be alone when they return."

We trod lightly back into the shadow and slipped behind a thicket opposite the fallen coach. In a short time the two constables stepped out into the open, both growling at the ill-success of the chase.

"This is a bad job for us, my Lady," said Jacob

dolefully. "I don't know what will be said about this."

"It might have been worse, my man," said the cool old lady. "At any rate, nobody's hurt, though that fellow still sits on the ground as if he felt strangely."

The second constable went to the driver, spoke to him, and pulled him to his feet.

"He knocked his head on a stone," he reported, "an' says it's all singin' yet."

"Well, what's to be done?" said Lady Lester.

"The wheel's broke short off," replied Rapson, who had been examining the coach. "We must walk to Romsey. Sam Pask," he cried to the driver, who now came forward, "what have ye to say about all this? How came the horses to turn so in the nick of time for the rogues who robbed us of the prisoner?"

"'Twas one of 'em did it, Jacob," returned the driver. "Surely 'twas of the devil. I saw a man spring out of a bush like, an' all he did, as I'm a Christen man, was to whisper to they horses. Yes, friends," continued the driver, lifting his hand, "he whispered to 'em, an' they went stark, staring mad. 'Tis a thing from the pit. Look at 'em now, tremblin' an' droppin' wi' sweat."

"A strange story as ever I heard," said Jacob.

"Witchcraft for sure," murmured his assistant.

"Rapson," broke in Lady Lester, "you will come with me now as far as Shotley. The others can see to the horses and follow."

The constable rubbed his chin and stared at her for a moment, then nodded his head as if he agreed. He gave some orders to his followers and went away up the hill with Lady Lester.

We turned and moved farther among the trees to work our way round to the horses.

"And the voice?" asked Kesgrave when we were well away from the road; "I expect you have not been able to remember." His tone was low and mocking.

"Voice?" said I, "what voice? Ay, it comes back to me. A young man shouted 'Father.' Who was it?"

"I thought your exclamation was involuntary," said the Earl, still in the same tone.

"It was," said I honestly; "why shouldn't it be? The voice was odd, ringing, peculiar. I knew it, and I know the sound now, but for the life of me I cannot tack a name to it."

"What an awkward thing you should have left slip you knew it!" went on Kesgrave. "It must be very galling to think you have opened a breach yourself in a position otherwise perfect."

"What on earth do you mean?" said I, stopping and gazing at him in sheer astonishment. "What position do I occupy otherwise than yours?"

"Ay, what indeed?" he said, and his lips curled in scorn.

The moon shone in his face, and through the holes in the black stuff his eyes gleamed large and bright and hard.

"When I looked over the ground from the top of the hill," he went on, "my first idea was to form the ambuscade below. You proposed the fringe of the wood half-way up the hill. I agreed. How was I to know your men were posted in the bottom?" For the first time I saw what he was driving at.

"And do you," I cried in utter wonder and amazement, "do you believe I know something of this most mysterious rescue?"

"Ay, I do," he replied, laughing low and bitterly. "Most mysterious rescue," he repeated in faint tones like an echo, and laughed again. "Mr. Ferrers, Mr. Ferrers! I have met many men of your kidney, but you are the prince of them all. I have studied faces in every kingdom of Europe and never was thrown like this. Half an hour ago I would have staked an estate on your honest good-humour and simplicity."

"What madness possesses you?" I replied angrily. "Consult your own common sense for an instant. What opportunity have I enjoyed to set such a thing on foot?"

"None," said he slowly, waving his riding-glove by the finger-tips. "None if—a matter which I take leave to doubt—the appearance of the constables were a surprise to you."

This crowning insult stirred my blood to flame, but, even then, he was quicker than I. Before I could grasp his throat to wring the foul lie out of it he had swung his glove in my face with all his strength and sprung

far back. The heavy gauntlet took me across the lips and the taste of blood filled my mouth. I held myself still with a mighty effort and looked at him. He had drawn his sword and the point was laid towards my breast.

"Yes," said I, "there is nothing else for it."

"And now," he whispered hotly.

"And now," I repeated; "I will not baulk you."

He dropped the mask from his face, and I saw that his features were ghastly white and working with suppressed passion.

"Man, man," he said in a choked, impatient voice, "I saw enough to-day to make me willing to cut your throat a score of times over. You were going to kiss her, and she, ah!—she was willing."

"My Lord Kesgrave," said I, "will you do me the honour to bear in mind the cause of our quarrel and leave other matters alone. We are to fight because you, upon a suspicion—utterly groundless, I declare it upon the honour of a gentleman—have seen fit to buffet me in the face."

"You are a smooth, formal old rogue," said he. "'Fore God, I hope I'll strike you to more effect in the blood-letting line soon."

We were now near the spot where the horses had been tethered. Colin Lovel had gone forward to loose them. I glanced round and saw him coming swiftly, stealthily back. He had heard the angry voice of his master. He stepped into a patch of moonlight, and I marked a

naked sword glitter in his hand. The Earl turned his head and saw the gliding figure.

"Go back," he commanded curtly, and his servant brother turned and went like an obedient spaniel. Before us was a patch of smooth turf cropped close by the heath ponies, level, and ringed about by dark thickets of holly and thorn, holding the moonlight like a bowl. He pointed to it and I nodded. We stepped forward, and he tossed his sword on the grass and stripped off his riding-coat and the one beneath it. Blue, green, red vivid shafts and sparkles of lustre flashed out from his diamond bedecked coat as the jewels caught the moonlight and twinkled like multi-coloured stars. I threw cloak and coat and hat to earth, drew my sword and faced him.

"My Lord Kesgrave," said I, "you will perhaps permit me one condition."

"And that?" he answered, saluting me with his blade.

"That your man stands somewhere in my sight, say a dozen yards behind you or where you like, so that I may see him."

"You do not trust me?" he said.

"I do not trust him," I replied. "I will fight you, but I will take no risks. And in the heat of a rally you might lose sight of him also."

"Mr. Ferrers," said the Earl, "you prove every moment how wise I am in doubting your apparent simplicity. I admit that you are right. 'Tis a faithful

dog and not over-scrupulous. If he saw me hard-pressed——" he stopped and shrugged his shoulders. "Come to heel, sirrah," he cried, and the man came at once. "Stand out there in the light and do not presume to move." The man took the place pointed out and stood like a statue.

"Now," said the Earl. We took position, and tingcling, the swords lightly and stealthily grated together. We had not exchanged half a dozen passes before I knew that Kesgrave was the best man I had ever met, either in sport or earnest. His attack was like lightning. Twice, thrice, I barely turned aside with my utmost skill the twinkling point which seemed to come from every side at once. He advanced upon me, but I drove my heel into the turf and held my guard stubbornly. A quicker player never lived, of that I am sure; time and again I beat him off but could take no advantage, since a fresh attack instantly engaged my blade. One especial stroke he had, a *botte* which I had never seen employed before, surely a secret purchased at a great price from some famous master, and ever since then mine own especial favourite. The first time he tried it I saved myself by sheer luck and the pommel of my sword, but I had seen it and watched eagerly for its reappearance. I knew well it was his last effort, and having beaten it from his grasp, the game was mine.

After a few seconds of ordinary sword-play, give and take, it came, darting like the head of an adder from its

coil. I attempted no parry but offered at his forearm. With my greater reach, to continue the stroke would have been to rip up his sword-arm from wrist to elbow, and he saw it, and turned like a swallow on the wing and wound his blade about mine.

"Your man is moving," said I.

Kesgrave stepped back and dropped his point, breathing heavily.

"Ay, poor devil," he returned, making an effort to speak lightly, "he is disturbed. For the first time in his life he has seen my pretty little *botte de mort* fail. Damn that iron wrist of yours!" This was spoken in a gentle tone of raillery. Then, "Ha!" he shouted in a great ringing voice, stepped forward with a swift stamp and lunged full at my heart. The trick was near enough succeeding. I had received ten inches of cold steel without a doubt were it not that I had become roundly suspicious and was ready for anything. For the first time I let myself go, and parried with the full strength of my wrist. I engaged his darting weapon, held it, pressed it back, and would have plucked it from his grasp but that it snapped short against the hilt. He stood before me disarmed and helpless. Yet he lacked not courage. He made no movement of retreat, held himself erect, smiled calmly, looked ready to pay to the uttermost the forfeit incurred by the false trick. The point of my sword was within a foot of his breast, and he could read nothing of my face, for I still wore my mask, yet he smiled and made a beckoning

gesture with his gay hilt of gold as if to hurry the play one way or another to its end.

"A noble stroke, most noble Lord," said I.

"Oh," said he, "you're going to take it that way?"

"You would have no reason to complain if I ran you through where you stand," I cried.

"Oh, yes, I should," he replied. "Strike or jeer, certainly, not strike and jeer. Or I will take my man's sword and try my luck again."

"I'll fight you no more," said I. "I have heard it is common among Italian bravoes to catch a man off his guard. You have learned much in your travels."

"It was half involuntary," he returned, more in a tone of reflection than aught else. "If I could not reach you with the *botte de mort* fair play could carry me no farther. Ay, it was vexation to think of your beating that wonderful, most delicate stroke."

While Colin Lovel had been uncertain as to his master's fate he had stood like a figure without life. He was a man of experience, who knew that to rush in would be to make the Earl's fall certain. But when he heard us talking he turned towards the horses as if the affair was over. The Earl slowly moved a step or two, then paused and looked at me. I stepped back, picked up my coat, slipped it on, let the cloak lie, and struck into the bushes. Kesgrave called after me to take a horse, but I made no answer and kept on through the wood.

In a few minutes I was clear of the trees and out on

the open heath, where I set my face towards home, some five miles away. I kept a good look-out as I went, but saw no more of my late companions. Where was Cicely, and who had carried her off? This question soon filled my mind to the exclusion of everything else. To-night it was impossible to follow or find out anything. The narrow strip of wood in Bracken Bottom widened out within a couple of hundred yards to a forest of young ash and oak where search was in vain, as the constables proved. Besides, it were unfair to follow hard on friends who might wish their work to remain a secret, and friends they must be. Yet who could have planned more swiftly and started out more promptly than we? Whose was that voice which I had known and thus started fire along the train laid by my Lord Kesgrave's jealous temper? I knew it still, I heard its clear call ringing, and I could put no name to it. I waited as one does when a thing seems close at hand, as if it would trip of itself off my tongue, yet it came not.

I struck the road about two miles from home, and tramped steadily along it till a faint noise came to my ears. I stopped and listened. It was the roll of wheels coming up behind, and I stepped into a tall thorn-bush for the vehicle to pass. It drew near, and I saw my own carriage, Richard, the coachman, driving, and Tom Torr sitting beside him.

"What's this?" said I, coming out of my shelter.

"Why, sir," replied Tom, "the word began to go

about yon place that you were nowhere to be found after they took the young lady away. So I slipped round to Richard, and we put in the horses and drove off. It seemed to us that if they found us gone, they'd think you'd started away for your own house."

I praised their ready wit and faithfulness, stepped into the carriage, and was driven home.

CHAPTER IX

SEARCH

I SLEPT but little that night and was astir before the dawn. The house was quiet as I slipped from a side door into the starlight, for the moon was long since down.

I went away on foot through the heath towards Great Barrow. There I expected to get some news of Cicely, and, as a grey day broke over the eastern woodland, I came upon the hilltop overlooking the house.

I approached very cautiously, for I knew not who might be about. This house above all would lie under suspicion, and might be even now in the hands of the authorities. I advanced until I stood under the garden wall. Here a great lilac-tree afforded cover, and I put a foot into a hole where a brick had fallen out and swung myself up. As I looked across the flower-beds towards the building, not twenty yards away, a blind in a bedroom was raised and the window flung open. I glanced up and saw Martha, an elderly woman who waited on Mistress Plumer. Tears were streaming down the waiting-woman's face, and she stood for a moment wiping them away with her apron. Footsteps crunched on the gravel walk and the old butler came into sight. He looked up and started.

"Well, well!" he cried hastily.

"She's gone, Simon," sobbed Martha.

The old man's head fell and he went on with a heavy step. Martha left the window, and I sprang down and hurried to the rear of the house. What new misfortune had happened? I climbed a low wall, crossed to the door, and went into the kitchen. Simon was kindling a fire on the broad hearth, his tears splashing on the stone flags.

"What's the matter, Simon?" I cried.

"My mistress is dead, Master George," he answered.

"Mistress Plumer dead?"

"Yes," he said. "She was brought home in a dreadful state last night, and now she's gone. And nobody in the world can say where my young mistress is either. Lord help us!" groaned the old man; "this is a house of misfortune."

"Did Mistress Plumer know about it?" I asked in a low voice.

"Yes, she did," replied Simon, "and me, and Martha. It was to Mistress Plumer that the men came to beg, and she and my young lady could not say no to them. Their hearts were too tender. But they would let no one be concerned in feeding them except themselves. They were as firm as a rock about it. And now?" He waved a feeble hand to indicate the pitch of distress to which they had fallen, and turned again to his fire.

Suddenly a distant rattle of hoofs rang out on the

road. The window of the kitchen was wide open on the side where the highway passed, and we heard the fierce gallop of several riders bearing down on the house. I left the kitchen, trod swiftly along a hard gravel path which would leave no traces of footsteps, and leaped the wall which bounded the garden. I was now in a little wood, and knowing every inch of the place, I crept to a point where I could command the road, myself unseen. I had scarce gained it when a posse of constables with a magistrate at their head galloped up and drew rein before the gate. I had seen what I expected, and I turned and went swiftly through the wood, aiming to reach the heath above, with intent to strike across the country towards Rushmere. Surely if she were not here, she had taken refuge with the Lesters.

Half a mile from Rushmere a stout figure on a cob came into view. It was Sir Humphrey himself, who had already received a message from his wife.

"Well, George, where is she?" said the old gentleman.

"I do not know," I replied; "I was hoping you knew something."

We exchanged details, and found that no light had yet been thrown on Cicely's mysterious disappearance. From Sir Humphrey's story, Kesgrave had galloped instantly back, and had reappeared among his guests so soon that, at a time of such excitement and general disturbance, his absence had scarcely been noticed.

As for me, when it was found my carriage and attendants had gone, it was said at once that I had been

driven from the scene, vexed by the ridicule cast upon me by the Commodore's tale. Having told our stories, we parted, Sir Humphrey bent on using what influence he possessed to smooth affairs, and I to beat up other quarters, friends of the Plumers, and places to which Cicely might have been carried for hiding.

The rest of my movements that week from Wednesday morning to Saturday night I shall narrate in a few words. I went here, went there, walked, rode, and ran, but of Cicely in the whole length and breadth of that countryside I found no more trace than if the earth had opened and swallowed her. The Lesters and I met at Mistress Plumer's funeral on the Saturday, and we compared notes. We enumerated every place Cicely might be hidden in; all had been drawn blank. We counted up every friend who could have helped her; not a soul knew anything of her.

"There's only one comfort in it," said Sir Humphrey, sighing in perplexity; "if we know not where she may be, no more do her enemies."

This was all the comfort we had, and I found it too little in that I knew nothing of how she was faring. As I rode back home my heart grew bitterly heavy and despondent. Was it but Tuesday that I had held her in my arms, and had almost kissed those sweet lips? It seemed some bright, far-off, happy time, between which and now lay a dreary waste of years; the world was different in those days.

That night I tramped my library end for end, hour

after hour, until, as fruit of my vigil, I hammered out a thought which fastened on me strongly. Cicely could no longer be in this neighbourhood. Look beyond, throw the net with a wider sweep, where then? I knew the connections of Cicely as well as she did. She had but few near ones, the nearest of all was an aunt, Mistress Plumer's sister, living at the village of Kensington, just outside London. Was it not possible that these rescuers of Cicely were as powerful as they were secret, and had carried her clean beyond the reach of these local constables and magistrates, had hurried her swiftly to a great distance where a hiding-place would be more secure? Suppose that while we pried and peeped down here Cicely was safely ensconced in some quiet corner of her aunt's great house at Kensington; for Mistress Waller, a widowed lady, was very wealthy. A letter had been written to Mistress Waller by Sir Humphrey, I knew, but that she had not appeared at the funeral caused no surprise, for the missive in all likelihood would not come to hand in time to permit of her arrival by the swiftest travelling. I resolved to go and satisfy myself. Very good. Then I must see to it that I left no loose end behind.

First, the folks I had in hiding, the Blakes and a couple of others. For on the previous Thursday night, tired with a long day's riding, I was sitting in a chair by the fire in the library, when I caught a glimpse of something white at the window where the curtain had been left undrawn. It was very late, and all about

the place save myself had long been asleep, yet the patch of pallor looked like a face. I took the lamp and crossed to the window. There, outside, on the grass, knelt a pair of wretched fellows, their hands clasped and held up to me in speechless entreaty, their faces white and pinched with hunger.

They were the Thornes to whom their mother had been carrying the loaf she dropped before Parson Upcher. Worn out with worry and anxiety, the old woman had fallen too ill to minister to them, and none else dared succour them. Driven by starvation, they had come to me. They were nearly of my own age, and, as boys, many an expedition had we made together after nuts, and nests, and trout. Poor outcast rogues, I opened the window and let them in to the fire. Then I foraged in the pantry and found bread, a large piece of cold beef, and a flagon of ale. It was a sight to see the famished wretches eat. They looked at each other and at me as the good food and drink slipped down their throats, looks as far beyond words as thought is beyond speech. These two, then, were now stowed in the hay above the coach-house. I had half a mind to shift them to some more secret place at once, but I let them lie for that night and turned my attention to personal arrangements. I sat down and shaped my course to my satisfaction, and then went to bed. For the first time since these troublous times began I slept soundly, so much relief had my decision to go to London given to my mind.

I was up and about the next morning in good time, and set Tom Torr to work preparing for an early start on the morrow. In the afternoon, when everybody but William Quance, the old butler, had gone to church, I took him with me and started for Ashy Coppice.

We reached the hut and found Robin Blake walking about bravely, considering the state in which we had come across him ten days before. Since he was first cut down in yon disastrous rout he had never known such rest and food as he had found in this little hut, and this, with, above all, the devoted nursing of his heroic little partner, had made another man of him.

"Come," said I, "this is fine. On your legs, Robin?"

"I feel like a baby learning to walk, Squire," he returned, smiling; "but I shall come on apace now, I am sure."

Both he and Hester looked curiously at old William, and I explained who he was, and that I was about to set out to London, and that William would continue to see they lacked for nothing. We talked over their future plans, supposing Robin should be strong enough to move before I returned. He had been farming a piece of land near Frome, but thither he dared not return, for it was well known in that neighbourhood that he had joined Monmouth. He had, however, a brother, a substantial yeoman, near Chichester, in Sussex, and he aimed to set out for his brother's house when he was equal to the journey. I took leave of them then, and, as we went back to the house, I told William to see

they had a stout cob fitted with saddle and pillion and some money for their expenses. After dark that evening I shifted my other rebels. I was not willing to leave them on the premises lest some of my servants should by mischance fall into trouble and come under accusation of hiding them, so I planned to quarter them in a linhay on the other side of the park.

Thither we went after the dusk was deep enough with a great bag of oatmeal and another of flour. A stream of sweet water ran within a dozen yards of the linhay, and I gave the men a free license to snare the game which swarmed about the place. So they were turned abroad to see after themselves, which they could very well do, being a couple of knowing fellows equal to making a fire in a hole in the hut after dark and cooking all they needed.

Early on Monday morning I put my foot in the stirrup and swung my leg over Roan Robin with great satisfaction. Whether it was I had formed too sure a hope, or whether it was the mere getting of active marching orders, I cannot tell, but I felt glad in my heart that I was starting. To be on the road again, to hear Tom Torr clattering at my heels, was pure delight. It was a fresh, sharp morning, a light silvery mist in the hollows, the road clean and hard, and ringing gaily under the clink of the horseshoes. I did not take the direct road towards London. Instead, I turned my back and went away from it, going mile after mile west till I struck a road leading north towards

Salisbury. This place we reached about eleven of the morning and stayed there a couple of hours. When we started again I did not yet turn my face in the direction of London, but trotted at an easy pace on the Bath road till we were well into the Plain. Then I drew my right-hand rein, and away we went at a swift trot for Amesbury.

I felt certain that if inquisitive persons followed my movements—and it was very possible someone might—yet they would not persevere beyond Salisbury. If they did, they must go so many miles through that desolate country to be sure I had not passed that I should get a great start.

It was Kesgrave of whom I thought, not of the authorities. He still remained at Greycote, and I felt pretty sure he would move when I moved and no sooner. If he still held to his jealous fancy that I knew where Cicely was hidden, then he would hasten to follow on my traces, and I wished to reconnoitre Mistress Waller's house at Kensington without Colin Lovel at my heels.

We reached Amesbury, took the road again, and rode on to Andover. Here we halted, and I saw that the horses were well baited and cared for. I intended to make a long stretch of it that day. The animals were powerful and very fresh after a good rest. My own mount, Roan Robin, heavy as I was, would prove equal to it I knew well. Tom's horse, a stouter grey gelding, was inferior in blood, but, carrying a much lighter

weight, ought to keep up, and Tom was an excellent horseman.

From Andover we rode northward, and about two hours after nightfall came into Newbury, and were now on the great western highway from London to Bristol. By taking this route I had completely avoided the long stretches of road upon which my face, from frequent journeying, was familiar, and along which I could be tracked with the utmost ease.

We had now broken the back of our journey and, riding easily the next day, came into London streets as the afternoon was waning. I had a place in my mind where to lodge, a quiet street running out of Covent Garden, and I found to my satisfaction that the apartments were empty. Behind the house was excellent stabling, so that all was snug and convenient. I shifted my riding dress for another suit while a meal was prepared. When the latter was despatched, I penned a note, took a large cloak about me in which I could muffle myself and be as private as I pleased, and set out for Kensington on foot. I knew quite well where Mistress Waller's house lay, in a quiet by-lane running southward from the village towards Chelsey.

I arrived before it with a beating heart, and looked anxiously up to the casements as I slowly walked past. Not a light appeared in any room in the front, and the sides were bare of windows. I went on up the lane, and soon a plain field was on the other side of the hedge. A few yards farther I came to a gate. Over

this I sprang, and found to my satisfaction that the field ran round the house on three sides. I circled about the premises, and perceived the place to be as lifeless behind as before. I climbed on a wall and saw a light in a room on the ground-floor much where one would judge the kitchen to be.

"Only servants at home," thought I. "Then where is the mistress?"

I gazed up at the great black bulk against the sky and wondered whether Cicely was there. If not, where could she be?

A door clanged and I peered out eagerly. I heard a man's voice singing the fag end of a tune, then he broke out into a shrill, merry whistle. His boots clattered on the hard path as he turned the corner of the house and went towards the road. I sprang down from the wall and ran for the gate as fast as my feet could carry me. I laid one hand on it, vaulted over, and stepped smartly down the lane. As I approached the house I heard a door bang, and the whistler walked away before me piping his merry note. I stepped out faster still, but before I could catch him up he turned into a small tavern some little distance below. I stayed a moment, arranged my cloak so as to muffle my face more securely, then followed him. Within, the place was not very brightly lit, though snug and cheerful, with a clear fire burning on the hearth, and near it sat my man with a pot of freshly drawn ale at his elbow. I called for a pint of wine and sat down on the other

side of the room to drink it. The landlady seemed inclined to talk to me, seeing I was a stranger, so I took some papers from my pocket and pretended to busy myself over them. Upon this she troubled me no further, and for a few moments there was silence while she polished a pewter flagon. There were only the three of us in the place, and when she had the flagon to her liking she put it on a shelf and turned to my companion. He was a tall, stout man in plain clothes, a coachman as I thought, though I had nothing but his air to guide me.

"And when will your mistress come back, Henry?" asked the landlady.

"Bless you, my woman," thought I, "what lucky chance framed your tongue to that question?"

"I don't know, dame," replied Henry. "We have had no news about it."

"She left no word with the housekeeper, then?" pursued the landlady.

"Not a word," answered the man. "Her sister being dead suddenly, you see, away she hastened."

"What's the name of the place?"

"Great Barrow, somewhere in Hampshire," said Henry. "I can't say nearer than that. I don't know that part of the country at all."

"'Tis a long way," said the landlady.

"Ay, dame, a fair step," he replied.

She was called away, and I made haste to finish my wine and get out into the dark lane again. Luck had put into my hand all that was to be gleaned here at

present, and I strolled up past the house again thinking matters over.

Mistress Waller had started for Great Barrow and I had missed her coming as I did. I still clung to the belief that Mistress Waller was the refuge to whom Cicely had been hurried. There was no other, absolutely no other, and I felt that it must be through her I should reach my love. However, there was nothing to be done now until she returned, for I was not willing to follow her. In some inscrutable fashion it had become fixed in my mind that Cicely was not in the country, that she was about London, either in her aunt's house or safely bestowed elsewhere, and I resolved to await Mistress Waller's return and plead my case to her who knew me so well.

CHAPTER X

MY LORD VISCOUNT DAMEREL

On the Tuesday of the second week after my arrival in London, as the evening of a dull day shut down early, I was seated in a very gloomy humour at the window of Old Man's Coffee-House in the Tilt Yard at Whitehall. I had heard nothing of Cicely yet. I had kept a close watch at Kensington, but to no purpose. Mistress Waller had not yet returned, and the place seemed silent and deserted, only one or two servants in charge. On the previous day I had received a letter from Sir Humphrey, and learned from it that the mystery of Cicely's disappearance was as deep as ever. This was puzzling and unsettling to me. Of a surety then Mistress Waller knew nothing of Cicely's hiding-place, for, if she did, Sir Humphrey would have gleaned a hint.

What to do I knew not. The tangle was utterly beyond my skill in unravelling. Where was she? My brains were beating, beating, morn and night for some solution of this puzzle of puzzles. Why had no word been given to her nearest friends? Was it possible that the hands which took her from the constable were unfriendly? and at this supposition I winced. But who could they be? I knew no one in the world who would be likely to hold an evil thought against her. The very

hounds of the law misliked the task of laying hands on her gentle beauty, her only crime a tender heart.

From the window where I sat I could see into Whitehall, and now a splendid chariot rolled down the way, and I saw Kesgrave within it. He had been in London more than a week, and for two days Colin Lovel had dogged my footsteps. Then he had disappeared. I had smiled bitterly at the watch my rival set upon me, so needless was it, and had taken no more notice of the matter. Bitter were my thoughts and feelings as I looked out into the gathering darkness. Hope deferred maketh the heart sick indeed. I had not enough spirit left in me to make up my mind whether to stay in London or return to the country. I tossed the question to and fro uneasily, unwilling to start, unwilling to stay.

A hand was laid upon my shoulder and I looked up. It was Major Temple, an old brother-officer and friend. He sat down by me, and we began to talk of indifferent matters. A carriage rolled up outside, and a man stepped out and entered the coffee-house.

"Damerel coming to life with the candles," said my friend. I nodded, but said nothing, for the newcomer had walked in at a door near at hand, turned towards and stood almost at my elbow, looking about the place. He was the Viscount Damerel, and though my Lord Damerel came into my life but twice, yet it was in so striking a fashion and calculated on such occasion to do so dreadful a mischief, that I must describe him particularly.

He was a big, clumsy man of about forty-five years old; richly dressed, yet looking like a hog in armour; but of these points you recked little when your gaze fell upon his face, for there his other imperfections were swallowed up. His eyes were small and fierce, his look lowering, his jaw so square and underhung that the loose flabby flesh swung like the dewlaps of a mastiff. His thick, baggy lips seemed too large for his mouth and fell loosely open about it, showing a tongue half lolling out, as if that also were too ill-proportioned to keep its proper place. Four or five great carbuncles studded his harsh, seamed features, and added to its repulsive ugliness.

His way of life was almost as strange as his appearance. He was a sworn foe of daylight and took his pleasure by night. By day he slept or spent his time in rooms fitted up to shut out the light, and his associates stepped out of the sun through double folding-doors into the shine of candles to visit him. He rarely came abroad before dusk save in the summer, when forced to it by the long days, and then he took his revenge by cursing the season and longing for winter.

My friend moved his chair a little and my Lord Damerel looked round.

"Major Temple, Mr. Ferrers," said he, in a thick, lisping voice, and made us a very polite bow, for his manners were as fine as his face was ugly.

We returned his civilities, and for a few moments chatted together on the gossip of the day, that is to

say, he and the Major did so. I had nothing to say, for I had paid no heed to the tide of rumour and chatter that sets in full flood through every coffee-house.

"By the way, Major," said the Viscount, in a pause of the conversation, "you remember Chilcoot's story about that gipsy woman."

"Yes, quite well," replied Temple.

"I've seen her."

"Indeed; when?"

"Yesterday," said Damerel. "Gad, I was so fixed by his description that I went out yesterday morning to Epping Forest; rode, sir, through the damned sunshine. And I was lucky enough to get a peep at her."

"And," said the Major as he paused.

"Oh," rejoined the nobleman, "for once Chilcoot was not the liar he usually is."

His tone was careless, but some memory seemed exciting him, for his eyes gleamed evilly and his loose lips worked.

"Did you hear her sing?" asked my friend.

"No," said the other; "I made no offer of speaking to them. She had a companion with her, a girl about her own age. By the way," he went on, "you and Mr. Ferrers would do me a great favour if you would sup with me to-night. Will you come in about nine, say, and we'll make a night of it? Two or three more are coming."

I joined my friend in acceptance of the invitation,

for I was utterly tired of my own company and solitary musing.

"Have you ever been at one of his suppers?" said Temple after my Lord Damerel had moved away.

"Never," said I.

"They are worth attending just to see the pitch of luxury a wealthy epicure can reach," replied the Major. "I'm willing to go, I confess it, as often as he'll ask me. We don't get such wine at the mess, or, begad, anywhere else in London."

"What was that about some girl?" I asked.

"An old thing," replied Temple. "I was taking a hand at basset the other night at the Cocoa Tree, and Damerel was looking on when Chilcoot came in. Do you know him?"

"No," said I.

"A foolish, vapouring, boasting fellow," pursued my companion; " and he was full to the brim of some gipsy wench he had seen in a dingle at Epping Forest. He said he was riding back to London and stopped to take a glass of ale at an inn on a byroad, when a small band of these strolling rogues came by. Behind them he heard some one singing. The air was sad, but the sweetness of the singer's voice stirred his curiosity, and he leaned to the window near which he was sitting. A pair of gipsy wenches were following the caravan, and one of them was of such beauty, according to his description, that we have nothing at Court to compare with it."

"Is he a person easily inflamed?" said I.

"He is so," replied my friend, "eternally running after somebody or other."

"Ay, ay," I went on, "Shakespeare has touched him off:

'the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.'"

"True," said Temple. "But 'tis another thing with Damerel. He by some means has caught a glimpse of her, and I can tell you that his contemptuous approval of Chilcoot's rhapsody stamps it as true at all points. Nothing would better suit Damerel's savage, cynic temper than to find the girl a common piece and make bitter jests on Chilcoot, whom he dislikes beyond common."

"I've heard he is that sort of man," said I carelessly, for the matter had no interest for me. I had put the first question in a curiosity so idle and little attentive that really I did not deserve the story at all. Major Temple now crossed the room to speak to an acquaintance, and I continued to stare idly into the street, where the carriage-lamps began to flame as coaches and chariot drove past carrying great people to a ball at the palace.

At about half-past eight Major Temple came to my lodgings, whither I had returned after leaving Old Man's, and we went together to my Lord Damerel's house. The latter stands in Piccadilly, and is one of the last buildings you pass when you leave London behind, and set out along the lonely road which runs

through Knightsbridge and on to Kensington. The night was fine and dry, and we went westward on foot. When we arrived we found the company was to be a small one, three others being present besides the host. Two were men who held appointments about the Court, Sir Rupert Yorke and Mr. Trenchett, and the third, Colonel Avice, commanded a foot regiment.

"Everybody knows everybody else, I think," said the Viscount with his thick lisp; "no need for introductions."

We greeted each other, and after half an hour spent in careless conversation supper was served. The luxury of everything was to the full as surprising as my friend had hinted. I had sat down to some fine feasts in my time, or thought I had, but the finest I had ever known was mere bread and cheese and porter on an alehouse bench compared to Viscount Damerel's supper. The room was lit with hanging-lamps of solid gold, which gave out a delicious perfume as they burned. Beneath their soft shaded light was laid out a table decorated with the utmost splendour, the plate and appointments no less valuable for their exquisite workmanship than the costliness of the metal in which they were fashioned. Half a dozen chairs were placed about the table, and behind each chair a tall fellow in rich livery stood like a statue. The meal ran as smoothly as perfect service could compass. Many of the delicacies were unknown to me, and some upon which I ventured very unpalatable. The markets of Europe had been ransacked to

furnish forth the especial dainties of every country, and the profusion was unbounded. Course came upon course, each in succession planned to stimulate the jaded appetite, and the only moderate eaters were my host and myself. He drank much more plentifully than he ate, and the glass in his hand seemed ever full, ever empty. The supper was over about eleven, and then we went to an adjoining room, where card-tables were set out. Lord Damerel and I sat down to a hand at piquet, the rest played basset at a large table. For an hour or more the cards were shuffled, dealt, and played quietly, every man intent on his game. The room in which we sat looked out to the front of the house, and the night was so warm that a window had been opened. Occasionally the click of the heels of a passer-by rang on the cobble-stones without, or a coach rolled along, but there was little movement in Piccadilly after nightfall, and for the most part the street was silent. As a rule I play a fair hand at piquet, but on that occasion all my skill had deserted me, and though I won now and again I was a good deal to the bad when a watchman came beneath the window calling in a deep, hoarse voice, "Past twelve o'clock and a fine night."

Viscount Damerel was shuffling the pack for a fresh deal, and as the cards were cut the watchman repeated his cry, now from some distance, and coming back faintly. Then the silence without became profound once more.

We were in the middle of the same game when a fresh

sound floated into the room. It was a distant rattle of feet as of men hurrying along the causeway. It came nearer and nearer, a confused clatter of swift, heavy steps, and my partner lifted his head as if to listen, his wine-flushed face and fierce eyes turned to the window. In another instant the newcomers paused below, and a swift knocking on the door was heard.

"What now?" said Colonel Avice, as the basset players looked up from their game. "Is your house a refuge from the watch, Damerel?"

The Viscount made no reply, but turned his head from the window and fixed his eyes expectantly on the door. The latter opened and a man stepped in. My Lord Damerel sprang from his seat and went to meet him. A few words were exchanged between them, and Damerel laughed, a dreadful, wolfish laugh. He looked round to us, his dark face wrinkled into a grin, and clapped the fellow on the shoulder. The newcomer was an undersized man with a down-looking air. When he lifted his head under his patron's approving pat, rascal was writ upon his face in characters unmistakable. His face was squat and broad, and his mouth was less a mouth than a great, flat slit cut nearly from ear to ear; as it widened to grotesqueness he looked wickedness itself.

"Was ever such a cunning dog known as this rogue of mine?" chuckled Damerel. "Now, Trenchett, you heard Chilcoot's tale and laughed at him to his face. 'Tis a pity he isn't here now. 'Twould be a triumph to

him to see how you bow your knee to sovereign beauty. Though, poor devil, considering the oaths I heard him swear that he would follow up the caravan and woo for himself, 'tis better for him to be away, for his chagrin would be unspeakable."

"Do you mean you've got the wench here?" cried Mr. Trenchett in amazement.

"I do," said the Viscount, grinning like a satyr. "This rascal has made a swoop and carried her off for me like a hawk snapping up a partridge. Come and see for yourselves."

He marched out of the room, and the other three trooped after him with outcries of wonder and loud laughter. Temple followed them slowly, looking towards me. I got up and joined him, and we went out to the gallery. We advanced to the rail and looked over. In the middle of the broad hall below stood a large sedan-chair closely shut up. Panels of wood were fitted over the windows and secured by cords over the top. It was a portable prison. Four men stood about it and wiped their brows. They had been relieving each other, two and two, at the poles, and had come fast. On the lowest stair stood Damerel, a little above him his guests. As we looked upon them the Viscount made a gesture to a servant, and the man advanced to open the chair. He worked in complete silence, every eye fixed on the tiny prison to see what it would yield up. The man unfastened two or three knots and the top of the chair was now loose. To burst

a cord of which the knot was difficult to untie he forced up the lid, pushing at it with one hand while he seized the frame with the other to get a purchase. He had no sooner raised it three or four inches than a knife flashed at his hand from within. With a scream of pain the fellow leaped back, the blood spurting in a crimson jet over his rich livery and dropping on the marble pavement.

Lord Damerel beat his hands together with a great laugh. "A spirited little devil," he cried; "'tis better and better."

He stepped forward, caught the writhing man by the shoulder, seized his hand, and roughly pulled open the wound, heedless of the pain he caused. "Right through the thick of the thumb and across the hand, clean to the bone," he reported to his friends. "Go and get it tied up, you rogue, or, egad, you'll bleed to death."

"Blister me," cried Mr. Trenchett, as the whitefaced footman hurried off, "if I were you, Damerel, I'd turn the contents of your chair into the street to go where she listed. The sight of yon great, bloody wound bids a man to be careful."

"Pooh, Trenchett," replied the other, "such spirit is beyond price. Who would value the lion's skin if you could kill him like a cat? I wonder which it was. For you must know, the paragon had a companion with her, and so inseparable were they, and did so cling together, that my fellows were forced to bring the two."

"This is an odd business," whispered my friend in my ear as we looked down upon the strange scene.

"By Heaven, Temple," said I, "'tis getting too far. What right had Damerel to drag women into his house? Neither of us can allow him an honest purpose."

"As to that," returned Temple, "they are mere vagabonds and gipsies. His purpose, I'll warrant, can do them little mischief. He'll line their pockets with gold pieces."

"Then why yon desperate stroke?" said I.

"To heighten the play," said Temple. "Be sure before it was given there was peering through a crack to be certain it was a mere serving-man."

"I scarce think that," I returned. "Temple, do you know aught of the gipsies?"

"My dear Ferrers," murmured the Major, "what a question! As if I should know aught of gipsies, save that the men are utter thieves and vagabonds, and I suppose the women are to match."

"True, as to many of them," I returned; "but I assure you from my knowledge of them that, as a rule, the women are as honest as can be found."

"Surely," said my friend, "this does not portend that you are going to strike in and rescue these distressed damsels of the ditch."

I made no answer, for I was watching the movements below.

In obedience to an order of the Viscount's a cord had been flung over the partially loosened lid and it was

again secured. Then he gave another command, and the chair was raised again and borne up the broad stairs. It was carried by us as we leaned against the gallery rail, so close that we could have put out our hands and touched the polished gilded wood, so close that I plainly heard a deep, muffled sob from within. Little, little did I dream that my lost love and I were within arm's length of each other, that my sweet Cicely was shut up there. There was nothing, absolutely nothing to give me the faintest suspicion that such a thing might be possible, but it was so, as I was to be certain before that night was out. But the sob I had caught had fixed my resolution and settled me in my purpose. Thank Heaven, oh, thank Heaven that it did!

"Let us go," said Temple, linking his arm in mine; "for if we stop much longer you will be quarrelling with your host."

"Did you hear that sob?" I asked.

"Oh, sobbing and whining, of course," he replied carelessly; "are they not the things par excellence when a coup of this nature is carried out?"

"He must let them go," said I.

Temple shrugged his shoulders. "Ask the wolf to bring the lamb back? Ask the weasel not to kill the young rabbit whose blood it is sucking?" said he.

"It were shame upon our manhood," I returned, "if we leave these poor creatures to his mercy."

"Heroics, dear lad," returned my friend, striving to turn me from my purpose by jesting, "and upon a sub-

ject unworthy of them. Do you suppose Damerel has kidnapped two princesses of the blood?"

"He has done worse," said I, "for he has laid violent hands on people who cannot punish him if he really wrongs them."

"And that's true," agreed Temple. "A pair of gipsy wenches, whatever they might suffer at his hands, must go in vain for redress. He is of great family, a staunch man of the old religion, and in consequence prime favourite at Court. But, pray, what will you do? Lug out and cut his throat?"

"Not unless I am forced," said I.

"If you are forced, Damerel will be a mere child in your hands. And besides that, I don't think his metal rings genuine. He'd sooner run a mile than fight a minute, I believe. But come, think better of it. If you drive into him, the others will back him, I know, for they are mere led-fellows of his, every one of them, and then I must back you. Just think of the endless jokes that will be cut upon us. Faith, they'll laugh at us everywhere. There will be pasquinades by the dozen. 'The Gipsy Knights; or, the King's Own to the Rescue.' Let us go to your lodgings and cool down over a bottle of claret, or do you come down to my quarters," and he drew me by the arm.

"I cannot," said I, "for the life of me I cannot go. Hark, they are laughing. What is afoot?"

CHAPTER XI

A STRANGE COIL IS PARTLY UNRAVELLED.

THE chair had been carried through a door at the farther end of the gallery, and I walked swiftly thither, my comrade at my shoulder, persuading and scoffing as he came; but I pressed on. The door opened to a short passage some six feet long, at the end of which a second door led to a large, brilliantly-lighted room. Within the room stood the Viscount and his three friends, together with his rascally pander fellow and the two men who had carried the chair. The latter was turned on its side and its doors torn off. I glanced round for its occupants. They had fled to the lower end of the room, where there was a small alcove. One of them stood within it, the other was in the mouth, facing us. Both were dressed in coarse russet clothes, and had their faces hidden behind the shawl which such people are accustomed to wrap about their heads.

"Driven them out of cover," roared Damerel in high delight, his seamed face glowing like a furnace. "See 'em turn at bay. By Jove, this is sport. Egad, I've never advanced on the point of a knife to make love before. After this the best will seem tame." He glanced over his shoulder. "Ah, Ferrers, Temple," he

went on, "pray come forward. Here's sport to be enjoyed."

Two sharp cries rang from the muffled figures.

"They're frightened of you," laughed the Viscount. "It must be you, Ferrers, they're screaming at; you're big enough to eat them. Now they've been facing us as quietly as possible."

It was I indeed at sight of whom they cried out. I was to divine afterwards that the cries were of wonder, not fear. Viscount Damerel made a gesture and his servants trooped out, carrying the chair with them.

"Hallo," said Colonel Avice, "the knife has disappeared. The pretty creatures are coming to reason."

"Faith, they know how to play their game," returned Damerel. "The time has come to unveil them."

He moved forward, a smile of triumph on his gross lips, and Temple clutched my arm. I shook my friend off and stepped out between the Viscount and the figures huddled in the alcove.

"Surely, my Lord Damerel," said I, "you will not detain these girls against their will."

He turned upon me haughtily.

"And pray, Mr. Ferrers," said he in his lisp, which thickened instantly with his anger, "do you suppose their will is to interfere with mine?"

"I do," said I. "If they wish to depart I know of no law which could properly detain them."

"Law," he sneered; "devil a law passes current in this house save my fancy."

"Mr. Ferrers has something of law still to learn," smoothly purred Mr. Trenchett. "I have worn the long robe myself, and I can tell you that Egyptians are nothing beholden to the law. It is good law to hang an Egyptian up by the neck after reaching the age of fourteen simply because the poor wretch belongs to that outcast tribe."

"You hear," chuckled Lord Damerel, his great dewlaps flapping about his jaws in his derisive laughter. "Have you anything further to argue in your sucking wisdom? Stand aside, sir," he concluded, "or——" he laid his hand on his sword. He could have made no ending to suit me better. I am no great hand at talking, and, to be sure, I felt that talking was useless. I drew at once.

"What quarrelsome rogue have we here," cried the Viscount, "to draw on a man in his own house? What manners are these?"

The Major was right in his hints. The man was a coward. My Lord Damerel was loud, was blustering, looked as fierce as a bear in a pit, but he did not draw the sword whose hilt he held; his loose, baggy lips twitched, he went all colours.

"Nay," said Temple, "Mr. Ferrers is the least quarrelsome person in the world. I never knew him affront a man in my life. You should not have laid your hand upon your sword."

"Oh!" he cried. "And there are two of you?"

"Certainly," said Temple. "If more than one man

attempts my friend there are two of us at once. Though, indeed, there is not his match in this company, taking us by twos."

"Curse my blood!" roared the Viscount, foaming at the mouth in the furious rage to which this opposition instantly lashed him, heated as he was with wine. "These are companions indeed for a pleasant evening. Is a man to be browbeaten like this under his own roof?" He turned, walked swiftly to the door, pulled out a silver call and blew shrilly upon it. At the same instant I heard a scream behind me. I spun on my heel and saw that Sir Rupert Yorke had crept to the alcove under cover of some hangings and was now trying to tear the shawl from the muffled face of one of the girls. I went there in a couple of bounds. He saw me coming, loosed the shawl, and sprang to face me. My sword was in my right hand, but he did not attempt to draw. Instead he put up his fists and struck out for my eyes. I dodged his blow, stepping quickly to one side, and returned his buffet with my left hand, catching him fairly along the jaw. Oddly enough, I did not clinch my fist, and so it was a stiff box he received, for I put out all my strength. He rolled pellmell before it, and struck his head against a table. He got up, staggered to the middle of the room, then fell again, the blood gushing from his ears and mouth. I stepped into the entrance of the alcove to cover the prisoners, and looked eagerly about the place to see if any other egress than yonder door existed. There was none. Not

so much as a window broke the smooth run of the walls. It was one of the Viscount's famous rooms where day was lived by candlelight. It was richly furnished and decorated as became a nest of slothful ease, but yonder door in possession of the enemy and it became a prison, a veritable *oubliette*. Something stirred beside me and I felt a gentle touch. One of the young women had come forward and was standing at my side, her hand on my left arm, lightly clinging. She still remained closely muffled.

"Never fear, my girl," said I. "We'll stand them off somehow."

She made no reply, but stayed close to me, still silent. And it was Cicely, my Cicely who stood there, and I knew her not, and she gave no sign.

The shrill whistle had been answered by the ugly little man, the kidnapper, and he fled away again. This I had seen from the corner of my eye, for one must keep a bright look-out in awkward corners. Now a great clatter of feet rang on the stairs, and in an instant the doorway was filled with a crowd of serving men, every one carrying a sword.

"Stand there!" shouted their master, and he turned towards the room once more. "What's this?" he cried as he came forward. Mr. Trenchett and Colonel Avice were kneeling beside Sir Rupert Yorke, stretched out on the floor.

"He struck Yorke," said Trenchett. "I never saw such a blow in my life. He has the strength of ten.

Yorke's sped. See how his jaw hangs upon his breast. 'Tis a sure sign."

Lord Damerel dropped on one knee also and began to pull the unconscious man about as cruelly as he had dragged open the footman's wound.

"Dead!" said he. "I think not. As for the jaw, 'tis broken, that's why it hangs. Listen!" and he seized Sir Rupert's chin and grated the broken edges of the bone together to prove that the jaw hung free. He made a sign, and two men came forward and carried the knight from the room. Then the Viscount turned towards me.

"Mighty pretty," he said, observing the girl with her hand on my arm. "Valour defending Beauty, for I swear 'tis the lovely one who clings to him. I know her by her height. Only this time Valour is a crazy fool who little knows what it is to beard me here with my band of cut-throat rogues at hand. Come in, you gutter-bloods," he growled, and his retainers obeyed at once. They formed behind him, and a row of stouter and more villanous-looking knaves I had never seen.

"Picked men," went on Lord Damerel, looking at me, and waving his sword to them with a bow of mock courtesy. "Picked for what qualities I need scarce explain, but they are all men of their hands and will do aught I bid them."

At this instant there broke out a furious rapping at the door. Faint and hollow it rang into the room, along the gallery and the narrow passage, but plainly to be

heard, and the beating on the panels was hurried and incessant.

"Let no one open!" roared the Viscount. "Run, shout, tell Roger to keep the door fast."

A man darted out, but was back in an instant.

"They are in," he cried.

"Who?" screamed his master.

"Two men."

The boots of the newcomers clattered on the stairs and pounded along the gallery.

"The fellow ran back here," cried a voice I knew; "perhaps this is the place."

The steps drew nearer, and in strode the Earl of Kesgrave, followed by Colin Lovel. The Earl's swift, bright eye swept round the room, and then he came towards me followed by his man. He stopped midway between the parties and looked about again, a hard, dangerous smile on his beautiful face. He looked warm, as if he had been hurrying: Colin Lovel was dropping sweat at every pore.

"Mr. Ferrers," said he, "you are a most extraordinary man for turning up at unexpected moments. And your present air of naïve surprise is nothing less than genius pure and simple. I perceive the line you are taking, and it is very good. King Cophetua looking after the beggar maid for himself, as one may say. It is very safe and does you credit."

He had drawn a few deep respirations to regain his lost breath, and was now speaking easily, gaily, his old

self. I could make nothing of his speech, and, indeed, was not trying. The only thing for me to fathom was whether he came as enemy or friend. He could be powerful in either capacity I knew well, and watched him and kept my sword-point ready.

Up to this point my Lord Damerel had been speechless with surprise and wrath. Now he burst out with a roar like an angry bull.

"What makes you here, my Lord Kesgrave?" he said. "I knew not that our acquaintance stood on such footing as to warrant your bursting into my house."

Kesgrave's delicate face flushed brighter still. "On this errand," he answered in a low, cool voice, "I would burst into the King's——" he stopped abruptly and smiled as if he were half in joke. He was going too far, giving too much importance to the thing, as I saw afterwards.

"King's palace, eh?" said Damerel, finishing Kesgrave's sentence. "Why what a coil have we here about two sluts from a ditch. But, split me if you shall cozen me out of my catch. Ye shall all be bundled out-of-doors and that upon the instant."

Kesgrave laughed a little, gay laugh.

"One does not so easily bundle out the best swordsman in England," he said, pointing to me. "And Mr. Ferrers shall be backed up as stoutly as ever man was, be sure of that."

"Ay, ay," cried Colin Lovel, who reverenced no man,

not even the master to whom he was so doggedly faithful, and said his say wherever he might be.

He held a long cut-and-thrust sword in his hand and looked as alert and resolute a fellow as ever stepped. His face was flushed with hurry and excitement, and the resemblance he bore to the Earl was more marvellous than ever. The oddity of this circumstance drew all eyes upon them.

"Stand back and clear a way for us to leave your house, Damerel," said the Earl, "and we go in peace. Bar our way, and you must take the consequences."

By this time the Viscount's fury scarcely left him master of himself. His horrid face worked into the most wicked shapes that the countenance of man ever wore. His hot, evil eyes burned foully upon the slender figure standing within the shelter of my shoulder, her hand still resting lightly on my arm. I felt her trembling from head to foot, and I turned and patted her shoulder to comfort her. It seems to me to this day incredible that I should not have known my Cicely. But I did not. I did but think her some poor lass, helpless and friendless and exposed to the likelihood of foul wrong. I know I ought to have been enlightened by Kesgrave's appearance, but it is one thing to put two and two together afterwards when the coast is clear and you have your mind free to think over matters, and another when the best part of a dozen men are sidling up and down in front of you and an ugly rush may come at any minute. All of a sudden it came. Damerel yelled

some furious orders, and they darted down the long, wide room upon us. Temple had been for some time at my elbow, and Kesgrave and his man bounded swiftly into line. We took sword space and formed a complete guard across the mouth of the alcove. For two or three minutes the mêlée was as thick and hot as ever close fighting can be. They were ten to our four, but more often than not they cluttered each other and attacked us rather with a confused medley of blows than with calculated skill.

This was a dangerous fashion to tackle practised swordsmen, and our weapons glanced and flew into the crowd to come back crimsoned four, five, six inches deep. The Major and I contented ourselves with passes through the arm or shoulder of our opponents, aiming rather to disable and drive off the enemy than to inflict serious injury. But Kesgrave and his men were to the full as savage as our assailants. Both aimed full at the body and pinked their men as clean as a whistle.

Colin Lovel was next me, a fine swordsman, to whom the clumsy bravoes Damerel had hurled against us were mere objects for him to display his skill upon. The first burst of the struggle was short and severe. Then our foes drew back a little, and there was time to breathe and see how matters ran. Major Temple had a cut across the back of the hand. Colin Lovel's doublet was stained with blood on the left shoulder. Kesgrave had a slight wound in the neck. I alone was untouched. Before us lay three of Damerel's men writhing in their

blood, and a couple more severely wounded had dragged themselves to a couch near the wall. The Viscount, Mr. Trenchett, and Colonel Avice, with two men, were still untouched, and faced us resolutely, Damerel with a face patched of red and white.

"At them!" cried Kesgrave, and rushed full upon them, followed by his man. The generalship was sound and we hastened to support him. I found myself opposed by Damerel and one of his men, a little, nimble fellow who ducked and ran in under my weapon as his master engaged me. The man dropped on his knee and shortened his sword to strike me under the ribs, but I leapt back and cut him across the face. He dropped his sword and clapped his hands to the cheek I had severed, then sprang up and stumbled blindly away, the blood spurting hideously from between his fingers.

Now I stood face to face with the Viscount, and if ever I saw a man in a fright my Lord Damerel was that man. His great tongue lolled out, his loose lips puckered about it, and great drops of sweat hopped from his forehead and rolled down his cheeks. However, he made a desperate best of it, thrusting and guarding, and keeping himself a whole skin, for I did put aside his blundering *bottes* without offering any *riposts*. With the tail of my eye I saw Kesgrave whip Mr. Trenchett's rapier out of his hand, and then the Earl turned towards us. For an instant he looked on, then cried out:

"Come, Ferrers, you are but playing with the rogue. 'Tis below fair that the clumsy carrion should escape scot-free from a broil he has set on foot himself." And with that Kesgrave stepped forward and drove his rapier through Damerel's shoulder as the latter leaned forward for a thrust. With a dreadful scream the wounded man pitched heavily to the floor, and the Earl laughed aloud. Before I could speak Kesgrave glanced over his shoulder and uttered a great oath of surprise. He slipped his bloody sword into the sheath and darted from the room, Colin Lovel running instantly on his heels.

I looked round and saw that the alcove was empty. The Egyptians were gone. The second part of the skirmish had been fought out at one side of the room, leaving a clear track from the alcove to the door, and they had seized the opportunity to escape. "A good thing, too," thought I; "I hope they have got clear of the house."

"Come, Temple," I said aloud, "there is no reason to stay longer. The girls have taken their chance to free themselves."

He followed from the room, no one willing to stay us, and we went along the gallery. The hall was silent and deserted, the great door flung back, the light of the lamps striking out into the dark, quiet street. We heard a faint noise of running feet in the distance. Why Kesgrave and his man were pursuing the girls I could not fathom. I thought it was very unlikely he

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would ever come up with them, since the night was dark and the fields close at hand, with many turns of lanes and footpaths; then I dismissed the matter from my mind. Temple and I left the house at once and walked eastward.

"How grateful and cool is the night air!" cried my friend. "Upon my soul that little burst had warmed me beyond belief."

"Did I not see you bleeding?" I asked. "You are a true, staunch old friend, Temple. Against your judgment you backed me up and saw me through."

"Nothing," he replied; "a scratch on the hand. Not worth wrapping a kerchief about. Does not this strike you as a very odd business? What in the world could have brought my Lord Kesgrave into it, and so furious too?"

"It is odd," said I. "In the flurry of affairs I have not had time to remark it. Can he be a pretender to this young lady who has fired all who catch a glimpse of her?"

"It must be so," returned Temple. "I cannot see aught else for it."

"Well," I went on, "I trust they will get safely back to their friends and keep out of the way of trepanners for the future."

We turned into the Haymarket and presently came below the windows of a tavern. The sash of one was flung open to the mild night air, and a loud clatter of mirth and jollity rang out into the street.

"'Tis a club meeting," said my friend. "Come in. I can introduce you. I am a member."

"No," said I. "I shall go back to my lodgings. But do you join your friends by all means."

He demurred a little, but in the end we parted, and I walked briskly home. I went up to my bedroom at once and began to prepare for rest. I threw off my coat and waistcoat and something tinkled on the floor. I lifted the candle from the table to see what had fallen, and the light shone on a little ring. I picked it up, and for a second I could not breathe, my heart refused to beat. It was Cicely's ring, the ring she had given me in token of troth, the ring she had taken back. It must have fallen from my pocket. Who had placed it there? As I blindly wondered something slipped into my mind, brought there by what subtile process who can say? The name I had been searching for ever since that night in Bracken Bottom, the name of him who cried "Right, father," came unbidden to the tip of my tongue. Young Jasper Lee. So it was. The gipsy Lees. I saw it all, and knew everything. The Lees had rescued Cicely and she was with them. It was the haunting, bewitching loveliness of her dear face which had set these libertine rogues buzzing about her. Cicely herself had been delivered into the hands of the vile Damerel, and at the thought my blood boiled, and I trembled from head to foot. Be sure it was something higher than mere coincidence which set me between my love and the vile debauchee that night. It

was she who had stood at my shoulder and dropped the ring into my pocket.

And Kesgrave? He knew of her condition too. He knew what that shabby garb close-folded hid. That was certain. That explained all, all. My brain burned. I sprang to my feet and tramped my room end for end for a while. Then I began to strip off the fine clothes I had worn during the evening. I replaced them by simpler garments, and wrapped myself close in a large, loose, plain coat above all. Under it I buckled on my sword and went out into the night once more.

Sleep was impossible. I must be doing something. To think that Cicely was, must be, somewhere close at hand spurred me fiercely to instant search. Whither had she fled from yonder house? I strode swiftly westward till my feet rang along Piccadilly again, and on the other side of the way I stopped opposite Damerel's house. A faint light burned in the hall, every other window was dark and silent.

But an hour or two before Cicely herself had trod the stones of this street, and it seemed incredible to me. Did Kesgrave know where to follow her? My heart sank at the thought of that. But I plucked up my courage again. Time enough for sighing when the game was utterly lost. Epping Forest was the place for me to draw, for it was certain the Lees must be camped thereabout.

I pondered over my bearings for a couple of minutes, and thought out a route. Then away I marched to the

northeast, feeling every now and then to be sure that my precious little talisman, the tiny ring of pearls, was safe. Cicely would never have given it back to my keeping if she had not become persuaded of her mistake, I knew, and to be certain of that was a great relief.

CHAPTER XII

I GET MARCHING ORDERS MYSELF

Of my expedition to Epping I shall give few details, for it led to nothing. I came up to the Forest as day was breaking, and hired a countryman whom I saw at work plashing a hedge to guide me. He proved a good, honest fellow well acquainted with every gipsy lair in the Forest—for it seems they have regular camping-places there—and upon promise of a guinea—at which his eyes shone, for the money seemed a little fortune to him—he led me very faithfully to every likely spot.

He made inquiries, too, of all sorts of people, and towards midday brought me word from a little cottage that a party consisting of two men and three women had been seen very early that morning making great speed down a lane which passed the house and led towards London. By this time we had drawn every cover blank, and my guide professed himself unable to point out any other lurking-place of the people whom we sought. I believed him and thought for a moment; then I decided to return to London and have an eye kept on Kesgrave's movements. It was certain he had known something of Cicely and

might know something now. I had fixed also on the man to watch him. Jan Torr was in London; he had coolly stopped me in the street two days before, and begged of me, and received something before I had known him, so cleverly was he disguised. He would be the very fellow to employ.

It was now many hours since the party spoken of had passed, and even were they the people I sought, to track them was impossible. A gipsy knows the country as scarce any other man knows it and leaves no more trail than an otter in a river. My guide led me to the nearest main road for London, and I took leave of him and stepped out at a round pace.

I had scarce gone half a mile when an empty carriage returning to town rattled up behind me. I stopped it, struck a bargain with the driver, and, the cattle being good, was carried back to the city to an inn where the carriage stood. From this place I walked straight to my lodgings, and had scarce entered the door when Tom Torr, my man, who was on the watch for me, thrust a letter into my hand and begged me to read it at once. The honest fellow was as white as if he had seen a ghost, and to my surprise I saw a lad from Whitemead standing a little farther down the passage. He was in my service, Jem Quance, the grandson of William Quance, my old butler.

I glanced at the superscription of the letter and saw that it was in the old man's handwriting. I broke the seal and read:

"HONOURED SIR,—I write to inform you that a dreadful accident has happened. The Thorne lads became careless and did not keep close enough in hiding and have been taken. It was thought that they had been stowed there by Jasper Tibbetts, whose farm lies next thereby. But he, to save himself, declared that they had been placed so by you, for this the Thornes had told him. And now warrants are out to seize you. It is known you are in London, and there are folk ready on the road to take you. This will be brought you by Jem. I shall mount him on a good horse and start him for Andover, whereby I trust you will receive this in good time. Fly, fly, my dear master, and save yourself. Look not for mercy. Here is nothing but folks hanged, their bodies torn in pieces, and set up at every turn. The other nest is now empty. The birds are flown and are, I believe, safe. Fly at once. I have spoken with Sir Humphrey and he says you have bitter enemies.

"Your faithful servant,

"WILLIAM QUANCE."

I gave a cry of vexation as I found how matters stood. Here was I hot upon the trail of Cicely, and yet must fly to save my own neck. I knew well that if I were taken my death was certain. The bloody tales which poured up from the west made that as sure as mortal thing could be. Well, first of all, how much time had I?

"Now, Jem," said I, "when did you start?"

"Last night, sir," he replied, "just after dark."

I stared at him in surprise. He had lost no time on his errand.

"Well done, Jem!" said I, and patted his shoulder. "Good indeed. Then I am in no immediate danger. But how did you compass it?"

I looked at him closer and saw that he was trembling. The light in the passage was poor, and I drew him into the parlour where I sat. He was a lean, hard, wiry lad, but his face was grey with fatigue and exhaustion. I filled out a glass of wine and he drank it. I called to Tom to bring food, and asked why he had not been attended to before. I was told that he had come in but the very instant I arrived. I wanted him to rest and eat before he told his story, but the wine had revived him and he would tell all he knew upon the instant. His story was this—that the post carrying the warrant for my apprehension started out about an hour before he did; so much he had learned from a gentleman, a friend of mine, anxious for my escape, and who, meeting him upon the road, had suspected his errand, and bidden him ride, ride. The post had taken the usual road through Winchester. He, well mounted, a light weight, and an excellent horseman, had ridden for Andover, and then through Basingstoke. He had left Whitemead about half-past seven in the evening, and by three the next morning had travelled sixty miles without changing horse. This brought him to a farmhouse near Wokingham, where old William Quance had

friends, and Jem carried a letter from his grandfather to them. Here he left his horse and, staying only to snatch a morsel of meat and drink, had pushed northward on a borrowed horse up to the West road. On reaching the main highway he had ridden post, hiring at every stage and sending the cattle along full tilt. In this fashion he had made the journey at wonderful speed and, for a certainty, had outridden the folks on the Winchester road by many an hour.

I thanked and rewarded him for the great service he had rendered me, then set myself to a careful conning of the case in which I stood.

I was resolved not to leave London, and in a short time I had beaten out a plan I considered worth trying. I would send Tom Torr abroad in my place, with Jem in attendance on him, and I would stay behind to search for Cicely. I gave some directions to Tom, changed my clothes for a better suit, and went out at once.

I visited several shops where I was well known, bought several things suitable for a journey and ordered them to be sent home at once, as I departed for abroad that same day. I met two or three friends and made my adieux to them. I went into Old Man's Coffee-House in the Tilt Yard, where I was well known, and announced my intention to a knot of acquaintances listening gravely to a boy who was reading aloud a newsletter to them.

The news the boy was piping out, namely, that such a number of rebels had been hanged, quartered, and the

fragments of their carcasses dipped in boiling pitch, and exposed in this place, and such a number again in another place, quickened my steps, and I returned towards my lodgings. Jem had made such speed that I knew that the post with the warrants could not be in London before late evening and like enough the next morning, but, for all that, my head seemed to sit uneasily on my shoulders, and I was quite willing to push matters along more sharply still.

As I approached the door a ragged, miserable-looking object shuffled up from the other side, touched the brim of his broken hat and met my eye with a merry smile. It was Jan Torr, of whom I had sent his brother in search before I departed to air the news of my leaving London.

"Jan," said I, glancing round to be sure no one could overhear me, "where do you live?"

He told me. I knew the street. A narrow lane running by the Fleet ditch.

"Ay, ay," said I. "Now you must be on the watch just beyond Temple Bar to-night as soon as it grows dark, and wait until I come to you. I look to your cunning to provide me with such disguise as will enable me to lurk about London with safety."

Jan rubbed his hands, grinned, and nodded. "Never fear, Master George," said he. "You could put yourself in no better hands;" and having received a few more instructions he limped away, his limp being in character, for he had no blemish on him.

I went into the house and found Tom Torr packing my mails. He glanced up without stopping his busy fingers and whispered, "There's a ship to serve your turn to a wonder, sir, a Dutch brig bound for Rotterdam. She sails with the tide to-night at seven from a wharf below the Tower, and, thank God, there's a fair west wind. She'll be out of the Thames long before there's thought of searching this place for you."

"Good, Tom," said I. "Go on with your packing and listen to me."

I unfolded my plan and told him what I wished him to do. He was a keen fellow, and I was quite confident he could carry out the part I assigned to him.

At six o'clock that evening I left my lodgings with Tom in attendance upon me. Jem Quance had already been sent away and was waiting to join us on the road. My landlord bowed me politely from the door, assuring me again and again that my horses should be well cared for till my return, for I had bidden him keep them, as I should hire abroad. A porter had been despatched an hour since with the baggage to the ship. The evening was dull and drizzling and I wore my roquelaure. Tom also was muffled in a long, grey cloak, and I fancy the landlord would have been more than a little surprised could he have peeped beneath it; for Tom was decked out in my handsomest travelling suit of scarlet, laced with silver. Luckily, he was a big, broad-shouldered fellow, and though he lacked an inch or so, both ways of me, yet the clothes did but hang easily upon him,

and would never lay him open to suspicion of wearing another man's dress.

I walked at first riverward as if intending to take boat, but after clearing the neighbourhood of my lodging went east by the Strand and Fleet Street. At Temple Bar Jem joined us and walked with Tom. Fifty yards farther a desolate scarecrow, sopped with rain, his miserable rags fluttering in the chill evening breeze, drew across our path and went up a side street. It was Jan, and we followed him at once. Two or three turns through close, filthy alleys landed us in a blind court, and Jan turned on us with a grin. I glanced round, saw that we were safe from observation, indeed it was almost dark among the tall blank walls which surrounded us, and stripped off my laced roquelaure. I handed it to Tom, received from him his grey cloak, and we exchanged hats. He was now equipped *cap-a-pie,* and away we went, with Jem at his heels for his servant, to play the gentleman in my stead.

"Fine times these with Tom, Master George," chuckled the vagrant; "but come, we'll steal away to my earth and put you in a safer case if you wish to walk London streets and not look yourself."

We left the place, only to cross the road and plunge into a narrow opening between two houses opposite, and he led me by alleys and courts and by dirty, winding lanes to the very heart of the haunts of rascaldom. Here, in a street of tall, old houses, where the kennel stunk vilely and no light was to be seen, he turned in

at an open door and began to ascend a common stair. I followed him with the cloak wrapped close about me and my face muffled, but there seemed no one about, and we quickly reached his room. As soon as I was inside, he clapped the door to, shot a bolt, and straightened himself up.

"Here we are, Captain," he said. "Now, what's to do?"

"I have concluded, Jan," said I, "to dress as a porter and carry a knot. Pray assist me to the clothes."

"Nothing easier, sir," replied Jan, "and a good disguise, too. I will go about it at once."

He took a piece of string and measured me here and there in a dexterous fashion, then went away, well furnished with money, to make his purchases. I drew the bolt behind him and sat down by a small fire of sea coal, which burned cheerfully in one corner of the huge rusty grate, and looked about me. The house had once been a residence of high degree, for the room in which I sat was of ample proportions, and the ceiling quaintly moulded with figures of forest animals, wreaths, and festoons, and the window tall and wide. But the hollows of the mouldings were filled with dust and filth, the panes broken and stuffed with rags, the floor uneven and shaky as though the beams were rotten.

In a few minutes I heard Jan tap on the door in the fashion upon which we had agreed, and I admitted him. He produced a bundle of clothes and I looked at them.

I tried on the coat first of all, but it was, as I had suspected, too narrow across the shoulders.

"I'll go fetch another," said he, and away he went.

While he was gone I tried on the other things he had brought and found I could get into them well enough. Upon his return I was clad in a coarse, woollen shirt, a shag waistcoat, a pair of stout canvas breeches, worsted stockings, and rude, clumsy shoes tied with strong cord.

"Ay, the difference!" cried Jan, as he walked in. "'Tis true, Captain, that fine feathers make fine birds. Why, your honour's three parts on the way of being unbeknown now. Trust me for finishing the job in style. Try this, Master George."

He handed me a rough, frieze coat intended to be worn in stormy weather above the usual walking-coat, and this cased me easily.

"Now for my share of the play," said Jan, laughing.

He begged me to sit down again on the block of wood, which was the only seat in the place, and drew out a small packet from some corner of his clothes. This he unrolled and took from it a pair of little sharp scissors. I had laid my periwig aside and my own hair beneath was fairly short. With a few snips he hacked it into clumsy tails and snags, towzled it, so that it looked as if it had never known a comb, then stepped back to survey me with a critical eye. I followed his movements by means of a looking-glass, a piece of a broken mirror which he had borrowed at the old clothes dealer and which he had put into my hand.

He gave a nod of satisfaction, shuffled his parcel again, and produced a haresfoot and two or three knots of rag. These, upon being unscrewed, proved to contain certain powders of different colours, and dipping his brush into them he proceeded to paint with much skill a great, livid bruise down the right side of my face. It was done wonderfully. When he had finished it, it would have been hard to persuade anyone that I had not received a dreadful blow on the cheek, the swelling of which had gone down and the colours come out in all their glory. Next he produced a broad-leaved hat, one flap of which was broken and hung artfully down on the left side.

"Put that on, Master George," said the triumphant artist, flourishing his haresfoot; "and tell me, now, do you know yourself?"

"Indeed I do not, Jan," I replied, staring with wonder at the figure I cut in the glass. "You are a magician."

"Ay, ay, sir," he replied, doing up his little packets carefully. "Had I not this magic at command there's many a whipping-post I should have cuddled before now. Many's the time I've gone through a village one man and come back in the afternoon looking another, and talked innocently with the people who were searching for my morning likeness. Now, go where you will, you'll ne'er be known."

I thanked him and offered him money. But this he obstinately refused to take.

CHAPTER XIII

I PLAY A STIFF MATCH AT BACKSWORD

I SHALL put the doings of the ten succeeding days into very few words and go on to the next event worthy of record. I rambled the streets of London by day as confidently as possible with my porter's knot, sometimes getting a load to carry and earning a few pence. My main object was to watch Kesgrave, and this, between myself and Jan, was done thoroughly. Jan knew the Lees as well as possible, and what time he was not following the Earl or Colin Lovel to see what they did and where they went he spent in searching and enquiring for the gipsies. But, as I have hinted already, ten days went by leaving me nothing to tell of. Stay, there was one thing I ought to mention. On the third day of my disguise I was crossing the Park when an officer turned the corner of a path at hand and I was face to face with Temple. A sudden whim seized me. I glanced round and saw that no one was near. I placed myself in his way and pulled at my hat in salutation. He glanced at me enquiringly as if to see whether I had some message for him, and I smiled.

"What do you want, my man?" he asked. I laughed outright.

"Get out of my way," said the Major drily, thinking

I was some impudent rogue. I looked him full in the face and did not move. He looked keenly at me for an instant, then raised his cane.

"Oh, Temple!" said I. "And would you strike me?" The cane dropped again.

"The devil!" rapped out Temple. "Who are you? I should know that voice, but—but——"

"Well," said I, "this satisfies me with my disguise indeed. Temple, you did not know me at all."

The Major drew a long breath.

"My dear Ferrers," he murmured in a voice hardly above a whisper, "this is beyond belief. Why, everybody supposes you slipped snugly down the river for Holland three or four days ago, just dodging the warrants out against you. There is a most circumstantial story going the rounds of you and your man taking passage by a Dutch vessel which left the Thames the night before the hue-and-cry was raised on you."

"The story's true enough in its way," I replied, "only my man took my place and another of my servants took his place. Private affairs are keeping me about London, and I do not think I am in any particular danger."

"No, begad, unless too many know your secret," returned my friend.

"None knows it," said I, "save you and yonder fellow," and I nodded to Jan, who was not far off.

"He!" said Temple. "A beggar, a mumper, a cadger, a rogue. Ferrers, are you wise to trust such a man?

By his looks he would sell you for a shilling. But, perhaps, he is no true beggar?"

"He is," I answered, "a true brother of the fraternity. But he comes of my own people, and Jan would let them tear his tongue out by the roots before he breathed a word against me."

"Cannot I do something for you?" said my friend. "Command me in any way."

"Ware hawk!" I whispered, for three or four men of the old regiment had come round the corner and were bearing down upon us. Temple glanced over his shoulder. "Come to my quarters. Let me know where I can find you and what I can do," he said quickly, and then we parted, I touching my hat and nodding as if he had given me some errand. I struck away across the grass and heard one of the approaching officers jokingly ask Temple if he were trying to recruit yonder big fellow.

I come now to the tenth day, when about three of the clock in the afternoon I was going along the Strand and heard myself hailed. I looked round at the cry of "Porter" and saw a respectable man, dressed soberly in grey cloth without lace, beckoning me with his cane. He was standing in the doorway of a shop, and as I approached he patted a heavy bundle tied with stout cord and nodded to it, bidding me by these signs to take it on my shoulders. I swung it up easily and he walked away westward, I at his heels.

As we went I smiled at the difference a few days had

put between us, for I knew the man well. He was the proprietor of a coffee-house in the Haymarket, a place famous for the play of basset, where I myself had seen great sums won and lost, the table there being famous for high play.

I was quite satisfied to shoulder his load, for the truth is I was running short of money. The great bulk of my store in hand I had, of course, set Tom up with. I could scarce send him across seas in my stead with an ill-filled purse, and, in consequence, I began life as a porter with but a few guineas in pocket. I had given my fine clothes to Jan, and I suppose he sold them; at any rate, they appeared to vanish. He wished me to take up my quarters with him, but I would not do this lest I should bring him into trouble if discovered, whereupon he found me modest but clean lodgings with a widow woman in a lane not far from where he lay.

In my purse I carried a guinea in case of a sudden emergency, the remainder I had hidden safely in a crevice of my garret. As I never knew when I might want the aid of a few guineas I was anxious not to decrease my little store, but make my big shoulders earn me a living in the only menial trade for which I was suited.

When we reached the Haymarket the master of the coffee-house led me by a narrow passage to the rear of his premises, and bade me set down my burden on a great table.

"Faith, my man, thou'rt a stout, sturdy fellow," he

said, eyeing me and smiling. "You breathe as easily as I do who have carried naught but a cane."

He was about to pay and dismiss me when he lifted his hand as if remembering something. "Ay," said he, "thou'rt the very fellow I want for another task. 'Tis to move a heavy piece of furniture. With my man Will to help thee 'twill be done in a hand's turn. Come this way."

I followed him into the floor room of the coffee-house, where some customers were smoking pipes with their dishes of coffee beside them, and then upstairs as he led me to the room where the basset table was kept. No one was playing at this time of day, but a large knot of gentlemen stood at a wide window looking into the street. My guide led me to the end of the long room and pointed to a massive sideboard which he wished removed from one corner to the other. He beckoned to a boy who was waiting on the company and asked where his man-servant was. The boy told him.

"Run," said the master of the house, "and fetch him."

"Boy!" called a gentleman in blue, "fetch me hither a clean pipe."

"Attend to the company," said the master; "I will fetch Will myself." He hurried away, and I glanced through a window at my elbow as I awaited my orders. On the other side a ragged fellow sat in a doorway and held out a tattered hat. It was Jan. What did he there? A thought flashed into my mind, and I moved

across a little until I commanded the whole of the company. Yes, there stood Kesgrave chatting and laughing with a stout, good-humoured-looking old fellow, the latter something of a character or of a sloven, for he still wore a flowered damask gown drawn about him by a scarlet net sash, though it was towards four in the afternoon.

Now conscience made a coward of me on the spot. I became anxious to escape from the room. I knew very well I was myself, and somehow it seemed to me as if Kesgrave must certainly know it too if he once gained a fair look at me. I fretted to be gone, and as the master did not return, I forebore to wait longer.

"I can haul it across myself," I thought, "and go away below to get my money."

So I put my shoulder under a heavy moulding and swung one end clear away from the panelling, then went to the other, put my back against it, and getting a good purchase with my foot against the wall, and thrust it over without more ado, the great sideboard slipping easily over the smooth floor. Then I turned, and thrusting it inch by inch worked it across to the place the master of the coffee-house had pointed out. I straightened myself and drew a long breath after the thing was in position, and turned to go away. I had done the very thing I wished to avoid. My exertions, unknown to myself, had brought me into notice, and the whole group of gentlemen had come out of the window-recess to watch me wrestle with the great mass

of oak. The nearest to me was the gentleman in blue who had called for a pipe, and he now came towards me, puffing out great clouds.

"Fore Gad!" he cried, "a modern Hercules. I'd have laid fifty guineas at once against any one man moving such a cursed lump of timber. Ay, ay," he cried, "a true, English stiff-built. Look at the set of his back and the spring of his ribs. There's an arm for you and a calf."

He ran on as glibly as a jockey going over the points of a horse, and with as much gusto. He was a short, gross man, with a double chin and a face inflamed with wine.

"I love a good man as another loves a good horse," he cried. "Some match dogs, some match cocks, for a wager, but I match men or nothing."

I saw several of the company winking upon each other as this bragging, noisy fellow ran on, and then one said:

"I heard you were bit confoundedly in your match with Captain Wiltshire, Chilcoot."

"Chilcoot!" thought I. "This, then, is the man who first caught sight of Cicely and by his babbling flung the toils of my Lord Damerel about her." I felt no more the friendly to him for that. I stood still in the shadow, for the gentlemen had spread themselves about the room, so that I must pass through the midst of them to reach the door, and within a yard of it stood Kesgrave.

"Bit!" cried Mr. Chilcoot. "Let me tell you Captain Wiltshire is no more than a common cheat. Rot me! If he is not a bully of the blade I don't know one. He bought my man before the fight; but never stir alive, I'll get equal to him. I know now what to do. A plan has come to me."

He laid aside his pipe, and before I knew what he was about he had dropped on one knee beside me and was measuring me about the calf and pinching it critically.

"Blister me!" he cried, "'tis like pressing on a knot of wood." The next moment his encomiums were cut short.

It was galling beyond a little to be thus handled like a horse at a fair, and my gorge rose at it. Further, I had a mind to punish this fellow, the leading dog of yon foul pack who had opened out against my lost love; and so I put forward my clumsy shoe a little and trod heavily on his forefinger as he leaned one hand upon the floor. The flat, flabby finger squelched under my foot as if I had trodden on a slug, the tip burst across under the nail, and squirted blood a yard or more, and the bone cracked. I drew my foot back, and he leapt to his feet with a shrill scream of pain and dangled his hand from his wrist and screamed again.

The company burst into a great roar of laughter to see his raptures brought up with this round turn. It gave general delight, for he was keenly disliked, nor did it bring me under any suspicion, so perfectly did it

smack of the rough, surly Englishman of the lower orders who cares for nobody and is best left alone.

Then in another second a loud cry arose from several of them. "No sword to an unarmed man, Chilcoot!" they cried. "No sword!" Mr. Chilcoot was beyond listening to them or heeding fair play. It was his left forefinger I had crushed, and with his right hand he now whipped out his sword, and I had been run through without a doubt had I not sprung back. I was near a billiard-table, and I caught up one of the cues. These, as all know, are made of *lignum-vitæ*, a hard, heavy wood, and furnish, upon occasion, as stout a cudgel as one could wish. Mr. Chilcoot rushed upon me again, but now I retreated no longer. Using the heavy cue as in cudgel-play, I warded his thrust, and upon his attempting to renew the attack, broke his rapier off at the hilt with a smart slash.

All this had passed before anyone could interfere, and upon seeing him weaponless before me, the laughter broke out again in huge volume. Loudest of all laughed the stout old gentleman in the yellow gown.

"I would not have missed this for fifty guineas," he cried, "to see Chilcoot so put down, and by a porter, too."

With a viperish look round the company Mr. Chilcoot made for the door and disappeared, having uttered no sound save his cries of pain since I interrupted his measurement of my limbs. I had observed at the moment my adversary drew his sword upon me that sev-

eral other gentlemen entered the room. The feathers in their hats bespoke them military men, but I now looked at them with leisure to observe their faces, and met Temple's amused eyes fixed upon mine.

"My good fellow," murmured a voice I knew in my ear, "you are wasted carrying a porter's knot." I glanced round and saw Kesgrave at my side.

"I will become your patron," he said. "I am the Earl of Kesgrave. I have at this moment a particular need for such a man as you."

I made no reply, only executed a clumsy bow.

"I think you have some knowledge of the sword," he went on; "you shall try your weapon against my man."

"What, my Lord," cried the stout old gentleman who had just come up, "are you making a match between this fellow and your man! Then, by George, I'll put fifty guineas on the porter's head against you. He's a good man of his hands, that I'll swear."

"Content you, Sir Peter," replied Kesgrave; "I intend to match them for a few strokes with the broadsword to see what this man can do, and not for stakes. Your money would be lost at once. 'Twere impossible he could stand a minute before Colin Lovel."

"All very fine, my Lord," cried Sir Peter, thrusting his hands into the silken sash which girded him, "but if I choose to lose my money 'tis my own affair after all. And I have heard you before speak very confidently

about your man's skill. If he's so wonderful, why do you stand against me?"

"Simply because it would not be honest to accept your challenge, Sir Peter," replied Kesgrave, "knowing as I do my man's play."

"Prithee, my strapping lad, canst handle a broadsword?" said the old gentleman, turning short on me.

"Ay, sir," I growled.

"Then, my Lord, you shall stand me off no longer," laughed Sir Peter, snapping his fingers. "I'll back this fellow, and I'll say that if you don't produce your man he's not the swordsman you think he is."

"Very well," said Kesgrave, with a shrug. "If you insist on it."

"And now, too," added Sir Peter. "Wilt tackle him now, lad?" he went on to me. "I'll give thee two guineas, win or lose, and make it five if you win."

"Ay, ay, sir," I answered cheerfully, for I cared nothing to avoid the bout and prayed only to do well enough to induce Kesgrave to take me into his service. I was sure now he did not suspect me, and I looked on as easily as any, while he answered Sir Peter that he had sent his man on an errand and knew not when he would return, to an hour or so. But the words were scarcely out of his mouth when a young fellow who had returned to the window called out, "Here's your man, Kesgrave, bustling across the street in a hurry."

"Gad! we'll settle it now," cried Sir Peter.

Kesgrave gave a few directions to the boy who waited

in the room, and in another moment Colin Lovel was sent up. His master took him aside, and for a few minutes they whispered together eagerly. I saw Kesgrave's face light up, and he opened and shut his hand, a way he had when he was excited.

"Well, my Lord," called Sir Peter, "will your man come up to scratch?"

"Upon my soul," replied Kesgrave, glancing up, "I had forgotten the thing altogether," and he returned to his private conference with Colin Lovel.

"Thought he was talking about it all the time," muttered Sir Peter. "Some mighty secret or other in the wind, eh? Now," he went on to me, "slip off your coat and pull off your shoes. You shall tilt in this very place. Here's plenty of room and a good light."

The prospect of this match greatly pleased every one present, and they hastened to place themselves in a position to watch us and yet not to intercept the light. I slipped off my coat and shoes and waited for the weapons for which Sir Peter had sent. To fill the interval the young fellow who had seen Colin Lovel coming, a lively, wild-looking young spark, began to chant in a high, shrill, impertinent voice a challenge, expressing himself after the manner of the bills which are set about the town when two professors of the sword are matched together for a prize.

"Prithee, fellow," he cried to me, "what is thy name?"

"Never mind," said I.

"A Trial of Skill to be Performed," he chanted, "between two Past and Profound Masters of the Noble Science of Defence at once, being near upon Four of the clock precisely. I, Never Mind, do invite the Earl of Kesgrave's broth-man to Meet and Exercise at the following Weapons, viz.:

Back Sword Sword and Dagger Sword and Buckler	Single Falchion and Case of Falchions.

I, the Earl of Kesgrave's man, Master of the said Noble Science of Defence, will not fail (God willing) to meet this Brave and Bold Inviter at the Time and Place appointed, desiring Sharp Swords, and from him no Favour. Vivat Rex."

There was some laughter as he made an end, then a man called out, "Will you lay any more wagers, Kesgrave?"

"I will put ten to one on my man's head to any amount," answered the Earl coolly.

"What," cried the first speaker, "is Sir Peter then laying fifty to your five hundred?"

"I am perfectly willing it should be so," said Kesgrave carelessly.

"No," said Sir Peter, "it is not so. I said fifty guineas a side, and there it stands."

"Ten to one!" cried an officer; "the odds are prodigious."

"I am perfectly willing to stake to any amount any gentleman pleases," pursued Kesgrave tranquilly.

The confidence in Colin Lovel which this offer betokened checked the wagering which was about to be laid or confined it to small sums, until Temple spoke up:

"And you offer these odds, my Lord, absolutely certain that your man will carry you through?"

"Absolutely," replied Kesgrave. "On those terms I will match him with the broadsword against any man alive."

"Then I will lay five hundred guineas on the porter," said Temple. A thrill of excitement went through the room.

"I accept," murmured the Earl, and entered the amount in his pocket-book.

Five thousand guineas against five hundred. The match took on another look and men glanced at each other and nodded, and waited breathlessly for the swords to arrive. Colin Lovel sat down and folded his arms and stared impassively before him. Kesgrave, pencil and tablets in hand, looked round to see if anyone else was offering against Lovel, but all were silent. The messenger who had been sent to the cutler's shop a little below now returned with a pair of backswords such as are used in public contests, and Sir Peter took them and examined them carefully.

"Too sharp, too sharp," grumbled the good-natured

old gentleman, trying the edge with his thumb. "Egad, a man could shave himself with the last six inches. To draw blood is enough."

He took the hilt of each sword in turn and blunted the keen edges by striking them several times into the hard, oaken floor.

"Now, my Lord," said he, running his thumb again along each edge, "do you feel them also. They are of equal keenness and will draw blood at a touch. That's plenty."

Kesgrave examined the weapons and nodded. "First blood?" he said.

"Not for me," replied Sir Peter. "First blood may be pure luck or accident. Best of three, that's what I say always. A fair chance for both men."

"Very good," replied Kesgrave, and we were placed opposite each other and the weapons put into our hands.

Colin Lovel was, as I have said, a bigger man than the Earl of Kesgrave, and near my own height. The two or three inches I had of him ought to have given me the advantage of a larger reach, but now that I stood opposite to him I observed for the first time that his arms were of extraordinary length, and that he had, if anything, the advantage of me. We took guard, and he opened the struggle with a swift attack intended to give him first blood straight away. This suited me, for I wished him to lead to find out his play, and I found it good with a vengeance. He wished to nick my forehead and kept his blade whistling about my

head with a rapidity of feint, followed by such swift slashing cuts as kept my eye and hand as busy as ever I knew. So swiftly did the cuts and parries follow that the sound was of a constant tap-tap-tap of ringing iron. I tried one or two returns, but not with the swing I meant to give them after I had hold of his play, merely enough to stand him off when he drove in too close. Three or four swift minutes went by at this work and Sir Peter roared "Hold!"

We dropped our swords and he clapped his hands in his pleasure. "First round," he cried, "and neither touched. Win or lose, 'tis money's worth indeed. A noble spell of play. 'Fore Gad, look at 'em, my masters. What other country could breed so fine a pair and such honest, even-tempered play." A buzz of excited talk arose, and five or six called on Kesgrave to reopen the wagering. He refused, and Sir Peter upheld him.

"My Lord Kesgrave is very right," he said; "he was open to all wagers before the play began, and that was the time to lay them." He looked at his great gold watch which lay in his hand, and called on us again, and every one fell silent. This turn Colin Lovel hung back a little and waited for me. The round was short and lasted barely a minute, for I was clean beaten. The backsword is not the rapier. That is the only excuse I can offer, and perhaps I ought not to offer that, for I was fairly touched, and could not have saved myself if my life had been at stake. It followed on a swift cut of mine at Lovel's shoulder. He caught it, the swords

hung and grated together for a second, then he returned at my face. I brought my hand too far across, and he came back like lightning and nicked me neatly across the sword wrist.

"Blood!" cried Kesgrave, and we dropped back.

Sir Peter sprang forward and looked at it.

"It is nothing," said I, and nothing it was. A slip of a penknife would give a deeper wound. The old gentleman tied a kerchief about it, and some of those who had offered wagers blithely to Kesgrave looked at each other and nodded with an air of satisfaction to think they had not been taken. I glanced round and met Temple's eye. Two or three of his brother-officers were laughing and whispering to him as if they thought his five hundred at stake, but he looked serenely unshaken, and I squared myself to my work again, determined to win him his five thousand if my utmost skill could compass it. Almost immediately Lovel tried this clever feint and snick again, but I took him point on the stout pommel easily and near enough had him across the thick of the arm.

"Bravo, porter!" cried Sir Peter. "'Fore Gad, I never saw such play in my life. We have two masters here of a surety."

Ting-ting, cut, parry, return, I held him steadily to his full work and waited for him to get uneasy. I knew it was certain, for he had won so often that he had begun to handle me with the utmost confidence and to shake this meant to turn the game my way.

A breather was called without another touch, and this time Lovel sat down and wiped the sweat from his forehead. I was warm too, and rested for a moment against a table. The silence of the swords was the signal for a noisy conversation to burst out, and I heard two or three phrases I did not care for.

"A common porter? Not likely. Such backsword work was never seen. Who is he? A disguise. Must be."

"Time," cried Sir Peter, and we stood up again.

I saw a look in Colin Lovel's eye as he drew his guard, which meant that he had formed a resolution, most likely in the direction of an altered style of play. It was so. He adopted a freer action, striking broad sweeping blows to beat down my guard and just get among my hair, yet his skill was such that his own guard was almost as impenetrable as before. Twice, thrice, I was within an ace of touching his shoulder and just in the nick of time he checked my flying blade. But this shook him. That I should get so near shook him, and I began to feel hopeful that my wrist would wear his down. At the outset his returns had come in like lashes of a whip, but now they were stiffening. Again I tried at his shoulder and again he checked, clashing strongly against my blade.

"Blood!" roared Sir Peter and skipped like a boy. I could scarcely believe it. I had felt nothing, yet there plainly was a scarlet stain on my opponent's white shirt. So easily is the eye deceived that I thought he

had checked me a full inch away. The excitement now ran to fever height. We were neck and neck and the next touch must decide it. I kept my ears open as I rested and plainly heard a suspicion mooted which made me easier.

"It's the man without a doubt," I heard an officer say. "I saw it in the *Postboy*. It said that the best backswordsman of Yorkshire, Long Wilson was the name, had killed a man with whom he quarrelled and had fled. Surely this is some such a champion."

"Mayhap, mayhap," replied Sir Peter. "But we have no right to take any notice of newsletter stories."

"Who would think of such a thing?" cried the other. "I did but throw out the idea for what it may be worth."

The word was given, and now Colin Lovel came at me like a fury. His cool confidence was gone, his blood was up, fired with rage at the idea of defeat, his face was darkened with passion, and he aimed at overwhelming me with the sheer terror of his attack. I had him now. Sure and safe and sound I had him. This was what I had hoped to awaken, the volcanic temper which I knew to smoulder in his blood. Now he drove again and again at me with the point, leaving the edge, the true broadsword play. Ah, Colin Lovel, what do you do? Could you suit me better? I trow not. Yet I had no easy task to pass that lithe, true guard, but when at last, on a swift return, my wrist outstayed his, bore him down, and touched him lightly on the forearm, the

room rang again with the shouts which hailed my victory.

Sir Peter threw his wig into the air, caught it again, and clapped it on all awry, then came to pat me on the back and thrust twice the offered reward into my hand.

"Nay, sir," said I, "you said five guineas, and we will leave it at that, if you please."

Kesgrave came up, calm and smiling. "My good fellow," said he, "your backswording has cost me five thousand guineas, and I am well content if you will accompany me."

"I will wait upon you gladly, my Lord," said I.

"Come, then," he said.

Temple was at my side praising me for my skill and thrusting a heavy purse into my hand. That I took without demur, for he was my friend and we understood each other. Indeed, his manner might have given cause for suspicion had not the excitement been so general. Colin Lovel had disappeared, and the Earl now drew me to one side, bidding me put on my clothes and follow him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CLUE

EARL KESGRAVE led the way and I followed him obediently to his town house. It was a huge old-fashioned mansion near St. James's Park, with a trim courtyard before it and a great flight of steps leading to the door. He walked directly into a large, square hall, then signed to me to follow him into a small cabinet hung with leather, which opened from one side. Here he tossed his hat on a table and turned towards me as I stood inside the room. He motioned me to shut the door, and I did so.

"My man," said he, "I have a great fancy that you lie on the windy side of the law."

"I do," said I, bluntly and truly.

"Faith, you're an honest, outspoken fellow," said Kesgrave, eyeing me over his snuffbox. "You skilled backsword players are now and again too free with a dangerous stroke, is it not so?"

"He should not have angered me," I replied; "but I care not for what your Lordship knows. 'Tis scarce likely you are one to forward catchpole work."

The Earl waved his hand and smiled.

"For a man of your gifts," said he, "I have a little task of a few minutes which I will richly reward and afterwards put you in a position to make your escape whither you will. You will receive your directions

afterwards. Meantime, perhaps, you will not object to wait for an hour or so in this room. I will see that your comfort is attended to."

He opened the door on the farther side of the cabinet and led me into a large room handsomely furnished and the walls covered till they were hidden by stands of arms. I sat down and he went away. In a few minutes Colin Lovel brought a plentiful supply of food and a huge jug of ale. He set it on a table close to my hand, but neither looked at me nor spoke. He withdrew, and I was left alone to my thoughts; and these, as regarded myself, were not apprehensive.

The story of my departure in the Rotterdam brig and the suspicion of the Yorkshire backsword-player who had fled to London served my turn or did not. Either way I was resolved to stick to my present chance and do what I could to achieving the purpose over which I brooded night and day, the attaining of a knowledge of where Cicely might be. These men had known something before, or why Kesgrave's appearance that night? They might know something now, and I would tap their knowledge if I could. As I read over what I have written since that fatal night of Cicely's disappearance I become aware that I have not put in any accounts of beating my breast and calling imprecations upon the cruel star which had guided our fortunes apart, after the manner of despairing lovers; but I think the heartiest ranter of them all scarce ever felt so bitter and desperate as did I. I would have walked gaily

into a place ten times as threatening to me as my Lord Kesgrave's house to gain a word of her, and I sat there tranquil and watchful as far as myself was concerned and eating my heart out for a scrap of news of Cicely.

As I have said, the room in which I sat looked like an armoury. When I looked upon it more closely I perceived that it was a collection of weapons of all kinds and of all ages. There were muskets in every stage of development, from the ponderous arquebuse to the lighter flint-lock fowling-pieces men now carry. Especially was the collection rich in swords, from huge two-handed blades down through broadswords to the most delicate rapier. But the dust had gathered thickly upon them, a sign that the collector was now dead and his successor cared nothing for the rich variety of pieces here gathered together. A large pail covered with a cloth stood near the door leading into the cabinet. I crossed over and looked into it. It was not the height of good manners, that I admit, but I was scarce here on that footing. The vessel was filled with broken pieces of ice, and among them lay five flasks of wine cooling. Did Lord Kesgrave expect someone to visit him in his cabinet and was the wine laid ready to their hand? It looked like it. I thought awhile, listening intently. The house was silent as a windless midnight. Certainly no one was stirring in my neighbourhood. I took one of the bottles and went to the nearest window of the three which lighted the room. The casement was only latched, and I opened it and peered forth

cautiously. I looked out into a narrow grassy alley bordered on the one side by the house, on the other by a tall hedge of thorn. I thrust my head farther and surveyed the face of the building. It seemed mainly a blank wall and from no point was I overlooked. I broke off the neck of the bottle by a tap on the stone window sill and poured the wine into the grass below. I did the same with the remaining bottles and the great jug of ale, scattered the empty bottles about the table and sat down as before.

For some time again the silence was unbroken, then a door opened and feet sounded in the next room. I dropped my head on my breast and breathed heavily, noisily, my ears on the alert.

"And what's in the wind now, Richard?" said a loud gay voice.

"I'll tell you over a glass of wine," answered Kesgrave, opening the door.

"Pray, who's that?" said the voice again, as if the owner had come into the room with the Earl and was looking at me.

"A useful rogue I picked up to-day. But what, how's this? Have my careless scoundrels neglected my express orders?"

"Are you looking for wine under your cloth? What of those bottles on the table?"

"The devil!" cried Kesgrave.

His companion burst into a great shout of laughter and beat his cane on the floor in high delight.

"Bit!" he cried. "Curse me if the tosspot has not discovered your cool wine and drunk it up. Never heard of a better thing in my life. A five-bottle man, begad. A prince of skinkers." He went off into peal after peal of laughter, and Kesgrave laughed, too, to pass it off.

"And pray what is he useful for?" said the Earl's companion, coming up and thrusting his cane into my ribs. I gave a tipsy lurch and muttered, and snored again.

"Let him be," said Kesgrave. "We'll throw a bucket of water over him when we need him. After all, there's no harm done. We can sober him enough for what I want of him, and often enough these seasoned rogues fight better drunk than sober. He has beaten Colin Lovel with the backsword," added the Earl, dropping his voice.

"No!" said the other.

"It is true," answered Kesgrave. "The latter half of the match he played with Colin as a man plays with a child."

This was not my view of the affair, but perhaps this looker-on had seen more of the game.

"And whom is he to fight now?"

"We go to-night to carry out the plan which was interrupted by Damerel getting before us that night. This man and Colin will suffice and tackle the gipsy fellows, and we——"

"So ho!" cried his companion. "Have you run the

pretty little hare to her form again? Where does she sit?"

"That fellow of mine follows a trail like a sleuth-hound," said the Earl, "they are encamped off the high-road just beyond Enfield."

"And have you not plenty of men without employing this five-bottle man here?"

"Plenty," answered Kesgrave, "but I object to any of my people, save Colin, knowing anything of my business. A fellow like this is picked up, used, cast aside. A man who is to stay in your service should never know too much."

"'Tis a wise rule," replied the other. "But I fear I have not kept it. I've used my fellows, begad, in all sorts of ways till, I give you my word, I dare not quarrel with some of them."

"There you are, there you are," laughed the Earl.

"Ay, ay," said the other. "But come, we'll have a glass and drink to better luck."

They went out of the room and I heard Kesgrave striking on a call in the cabinet. Before it was answered he came and closed the door through which they had passed, perhaps that I might not be seen, so I could lift my head and look around freely.

I drew a deep breath of delight. Enfield—I would run there like the wind if I could get clear—the high-road just beyond Enfield. The thought of a weapon came into my mind. With a sword in my hand I would make it a risky project to attack yonder little black

tent. I looked round and longed to possess myself of one of a case of beautiful rapiers which hung at hand. But I dared not. It was still light without, and such a blade worn by a person of my appearance would attract notice at once. Then my eye fell on a stout, straight, brass-handled broadsword hanging next by. I listened intently. In the next room there was the clink of glasses, and now loud talk and laughter broke out from the Earl's companion. Who he might be I knew not, but seemed some friend in whom the Earl confided and upon whose help he reckoned. They appeared fast set at their wine, waiting, without doubt, for the darkness, when they might sally forth.

I slipped off my shoes and crossed to the wall where the broadsword hung by the belt which girded it to the wearer. I took it down gently and drew the blade from the leathern sheath. It proved a noble piece of sheer-steel, bright as silver save for dull stains which marked it here and there. Upon the pommel was stamped the date 1625, and without a doubt, from its appearance, it had taken its share in the huge feast of hard knocks which had been going since it was forged sixty years before. It was as fine a specimen of a trooper's backsword as I had ever seen and admirably balanced. I swung it and gave one or two flourishes. It suited me, hand and hilt. No delicate play here, but for ding-dong, slash and thrust, nothing better in the world. I took from my pocket two guineas and laid them on the broad, flat wooden peg from which the weapon had

hung. This sum was well beyond its value and I had no inclination to steal from my Lord Kesgrave. It was not likely that the sword would have been soon missed, for, as I have said, dust and neglect reigned supreme. To possess myself of this was the work of an instant, and I went at once to the window and looked out.

All seemed silent on this side, and I pushed the casement wide open, dropped my shoes and sword out on the grass, and followed swiftly myself. I glanced up and down. The alley at each end was bounded by bushes and a path ran all round the house. Nearly opposite was a gap in the thorn-hedge, and I caught up the things I had flung out and was through it in a couple of bounds. Beyond the hedge was a wall, five feet this side, seven or eight on the other, where was a shrubbery. I put on my boots, buckled the belt about me, sprang over, and crept up towards the road under close shelter of the wall.

To my joy I heard the click-click I hoped for as I drew near the highway which passed before the house. Jan was on crutches that day and I knew he would follow us up and hang about. On the edge of the road I was brought up by a stout fence, and I now stood and strained my ears for the sound of the crutches. I heard nothing. Jan was still: whether near or far I knew not. Time was too precious to wait long for him, so I gave a low whistle which he would understand. It was risky, for the wrong person might catch the sound, but everything was risky, and something must be done.

I whistled again, a little louder, and the click-click drew near.

"Jan," I called softly, and he came to a stand just as he was passing. "Jan," said I, "stay here. Watch Lord Kesgrave as before."

"Ay, ay, Captain," murmured Jan. "And where do we meet again?"

"Why," said I, "if I am not at my lodgings by to-morrow morning we may not meet again, Jan. For if I find them I shall go away with them, and I have a clue. They are near Enfield."

Jan understood perfectly well what I meant, for he knew what I sought.

"Then I report at your lodgings, Master George?"

"Yes," said I; "and, Jan, I have come by some money. I will thrust a handful of guineas to you through the hedge, though, indeed, I can never repay your faithfulness."

"I won't take a penny, Captain," whispered Jan. "Keep it; who knows what you may want it for?" He proved his sincerity by at once marching off.

I turned and crept back through the shrubbery, keeping among the trees and clear of the house until I came to a row of palings which gave upon the park. I looked back towards the house, but it was silent save the couple of hounds shut up somewhere bayed mournfully. Over the palings I went and dropped on the grass, then walked briskly across the park.

CHAPTER XV

CICELY

Of my journey to Enfield I have no more to say than that I made it in as short a time as ever a man did from St. James's Park, I believe, and that I halted but once on the road. This was at a second-hand clothes-shop, and here I exchanged my sagathy coat for a long hanging coat of stout camlet and my tattered hat for a plain, black one of more respectable look. This bettered my appearance a good deal, and now I had the air of a petty tradesman on a journey who has taken a sword with him as a protection against footpads. Well, I got into Enfield as the soft dusk of early autumn was creeping over the fields and pushed through the village and out on the highroad again, and now my heart beat quickly and I looked eagerly on every hand. I went a half-mile, I went a mile, and I saw no sign of an encampment near the road. I came back wondering whether I had been deceived and thankful I had left Jan on guard.

It was dark by the time I slowly approached the village again, and lights twinkled in the cottage window. At one house not far away the door stood wide open, and the gleam of a lamp fell across the road and upon a number of women speaking together. I was

drawing near when I heard a voice say, "Want to buy a loaf? I doubt if I have one to spare. However, I'll look, but I shall shut the door on ye."

The door was shut accordingly, and I came on intending to seek the village alehouse to make enquiries, for I could think of nothing better. Who were these buying bread? The ring of it sounded like people with unsettled homes, people who could give me information, mayhap, if I could but win their confidence. I stopped near them uncertain how to begin. It was so dark I could scarce make them out at all. They stood perfectly still.

"I crave your pardon," I began, but I got no farther, nor was there need. A cry, drawn in a long, quivering breath, interrupted me; the woman opened the door and a flood of light burst upon us, and against the shine I saw a pair of little, beseeching hands held up to me, and I heard a voice say, "It is, I know it is!" and in a transport of delight I seized Cicely's hand and drew her, unresisting, to my arms.

"Well, of all, and of all!" shrilled the outraged cottage woman; "low hussies and trampers hugging and kissing at my doors. Off with you! You'll get no bread here," and she slammed the door against us.

"I've spoiled your chance of a loaf here, 'tis certain," said I joyously; "but never mind, 'tis easy to try elsewhere. The other is Ursula, I suppose."

"Yes, sir," said Ursula, who had known me also by my voice, and away we went together.

"I heard you were out of England," said my love, clinging tight to my arm, "and, oh, you ought to be."

"So ought you," said I; "and now we must see what we can compass to that end. But did you really believe I'd fled and left you?"

She said nothing but pressed closer still to me.

"Captain," said Ursula, "the best plan will be for Miss Cicely to lead you to our camp. You can talk to my father and mother about things while I get some bread, of which we are short."

"An excellent plan, Ursula," said I, "and don't be far behind us. I bring news which will set your father striking tent at once."

Ursula turned again to the houses, and Cicely and I went away along the road. Heavens! the thrill of delight it was to know that we were together again, to hear her speak, to hear her laugh, for we laughed in pure pleasure as we walked through the mild, sweet night.

"I am only just in time, I warrant," said I, "to warn you to fly in advance of your greatest suitor. If you have a fancy for a coronet now, you have only to bid me begone and await his arrival."

"What do you mean, George?" she asked.

I told her how I had come to learn of her present position and how my Lord Kesgrave would certainly come soon to plead his suit, as I supposed.

"Let us run," she cried. "Oh, let us haste and warn Jasper to be moving! I would have fled alone. But you, suppose you are seen and suspected?"

She quickened her swift, light steps till I had to stride out to keep up with her. Not far from the village she turned along a bypath too narrow for two to tread abreast, and she took the lead, hurrying so that she had no breath left for the talk. We turned a bend and saw the encampment before us; a brisk little fire crackling beneath a tall hedge and two tents set up one on either side of it. Around it were three figures, who started up as we came forward.

"Danger, Jasper, danger!" gasped Cicely. "This is Mr. Ferrers."

"The Captain!" cried old Jasper in surprise.

"Yes, Jasper," said I, "and there are people planning a raid on you, as I have discovered."

"To get the young lady?" cried the old gipsy.

"Yes," I replied.

He gave a short nod, then he and his wife and young Jasper turned to work without a second's delay. In a twinkling the tents were struck and packed upon their cart, the two small ponies harnessed to it, Mrs. Lee sat on the baggage, and the rest, their staves in their hands, stood ready for flight. It was all done so swiftly that we were moving down the narrow path towards the highway before Ursula had returned. We met her just as we reached the road, and she had in her arms a great loaf, which she handed up to her mother. She asked no questions but fell in behind the cart, and we all walked swiftly until the village was left behind. We met no one on the road, but old Jasper passed the

word for silence, and not a sound was breathed among us. At last we turned to a byroad across a naked heath, and he fell back to speak to me.

"How did you hear of it, Captain?" he asked.

I told my story, and it pleased him greatly, for it was quite in his vein, the wiling out of their secret.

"I have been uneasy since midday," said the old man. "I went this morning to a farm about a mile off to doctor a pony's knees. The beast had had a bad fall. There I got my dinner and was going on to another place where they wanted me, when, in a little spinney, I found a tall, well-dressed man overtaking me. He was walking very fast and coming up to me hand over hand. I made so sure he wanted me for something—to see to a horse or such like—that I turned about and waited for him. Want me he did, but 'twas a puzzling trick he played. For he walked straight up to me, made a snatch at my neckerchief, and tore it from my throat. Then away he went. I could do nothing with him. He was half my age and twice my strength. But what he wanted that for passes me."

"Was it of value?" I asked.

"Not a mite," answered old Jasper. "My old blue and white neckerchief, not worth a farden."

"What was the man like?" said I.

Jasper began to describe him as minutely as a thief-taker's bill, and I had the man in an instant.

"Why!" I broke in, "it was Colin Lovel, my Lord Kesgrave's man."

"There!" cried old Jasper. "I'm never wrong when I trust to my feelings. Somehow I've been uneasy ever since I met him, though 'twould pass well enough for a rough joke, and I've been fancying we should do well to be on the march, and was set on being off to-morrow morning."

Young Jasper now called his father to the front, for we had come to cross-roads, and the old man hastened to return to his position as guide.

For an instant the oddness of Colin Lovel's filching of a gipsy's neckerchief hung in my mind, then the happiness of my position changed my thoughts to the present moment. The moon was now rising and throwing an ample light upon the road, so that we travelled easily. Cicely, my Cicely, rested on my arm and looked up into my face, the white magic of the moon flashing back from her soft, dark eyes; danger or no danger, those moments were exquisite.

And now we told each other our stories. I heard of all her wanderings: how old Jasper had got wind of the constables' errand and laid in wait for them, and how he and young Jasper had plucked her from the tangle in the coach and carried her swiftly into the wood; how they travelled that night, she on a pony, far into the depths of the New Forest, where she was to be hidden until a lucky moment to restore her to her friends should arrive; how Jasper came back the next day—and here her tears fell—with the story of her mother's death and the news of the dreadful doing at Winchester,

whereby it was plainly to be seen that she would bring to ruin any friend with whom she might take refuge.

Next, how she resolved to seek her aunt near London and beg advice from her; how they travelled up to Kensington, Cicely disguised as a gipsy lass, and found Mrs. Waller gone away to Hampshire; how they had camped here and there, never going far away from London, awaiting her aunt's return, and so her time had been spent.

We had much to say of that night when Viscount Damerel's rascally grooms trepanned her.

"And you never knew me; you thought you were defending some poor helpless stranger," said Cicely, lifting my big, clumsy hand for a precious little kiss.

"Oh, Cicely!" said I, "why, why did you not give me some hint?"

"I did," she said, "for afterwards. But was I to involve you when it was certain death to lend aid and comfort to a fugitive. Though, to be sure," she went on, dropping her voice and bending her head, "I knew then that you were as deep in it as I. Jasper had told me of the poor young people you hid in Ashy Coppice."

"What, Cicely!" I cried joyously, "you know of that? But how could I expect to hide anything from a gipsy eye?"

I drew her closer and began to talk of something else, and would not let her go on as she wished. No word more should be said on that subject. It was past and all was well.

"Now," I said, "let us haste to a skein we once left unravelled. Why, now, pray, were you so cool to me when I first came back from London."

"Oh," she laughed, "and have you not divined that yet? Do you not see that I was feeding those poor fellows then, and how did I know but that you had been sent to search for such. Was I to take advantage of our old friendship and make your duty awkward to you and perhaps even turn away from it?"

"The blockhead that I am!" I cried. "I never thought of it once."

"As for coolness," she went on, archly, "it should be on the other side now. You look far too respectable to give your arm to a gipsy girl."

"It is a respectability altogether of this long coat and hat," I replied. "I assure you that without them I am of an appearance to match. I have earned a living as porter of late. I have swung up bales and packages and carried them obediently at my employer's heels. Further, the pearl of great price is unaltered in value when you put it in a shabby case."

She laughed at the idea of me as a porter, and I had to tell my story in turn. Thus time sped so easily that I was astonished when old Jasper declared we had been three hours on the march and had put a baffling space between the old camping-place and the spot where we had now halted.

"It is close on eleven o'clock," said he, looking up

at the stars, "and we'll pitch tent and rest a few hours and be off again by break of day."

"Where are we now, Jasper?" said I. We had for the last hour been traversing a broad highroad, but it was unfamiliar to me.

"This is the Great North Road, Captain," he replied. "I crossed the country to it, and then held up it, for on a road like this we can make much better speed than keeping to rougher tracks. With daylight we'll strike into byways again."

I looked around and saw on either side a dark expanse of heathland. Jasper turned his ponies on the turf and we went sixty or seventy yards down a grassy ride. Here, in lee of a clump of hollies, the tents were swiftly pitched, but no fire was lighted. A hasty supper was eaten and then preparations made for rest. Jasper and his son slept in one tent, Mrs. Lee and the two girls in the other. The old man offered me a share of their shelter, but I felt no inclination for sleep and I said so, and that I would keep watch for an hour or so.

"No bad idea, that, Captain," said the old gipsy, "for although we have no expectation of evil now, yet one never knows what may turn up. But call me as soon as you feel inclined for rest, and I'll finish the watch."

He stayed with me a little while after the others had lain down and we talked together. He put aside with scorn any idea of thanks or reward for the great services he had rendered to Cicely. All that he and his

could do for her he regarded as her simple due, and I knew that in this he spoke genuinely, for these people are as faithful to their friends as they are dangerous to their enemies. Before he went I begged him to lend me a hone, for I had a fancy to put my sword in order: its edge was but moderate. He did so, bringing me a square slip of stone and a little oil. At a short distance was a slight hill. I went to the crown of this rise and looked round on every hand. The heath slept darkly beneath the moon, save for a glint on the polished leaves of the hollies and the broad, white strip of road. There was the stump of a felled tree at hand, and, seating myself on it, I drew out the sword, and began to whet the edge. It was excellent steel, hard as adamant, and I became interested in my task, for with Claudio—I "would have walked ten miles afoot to see a good armour."

Thus I spent a full hour or more, now and again taking a turn upon my post, and looking eagerly on every hand, though for what I watched I knew not. I believe it pleased me, the mere fancy that I kept guard over the humble roof beneath which Cicely slept.

I ran my thumb along the keen edge and felt rewarded for my trouble, to such a keenness had I brought the finely tempered steel. I returned it to the scabbard, moved to and fro, for the air was cool, and turned my thoughts to future plans.

CHAPTER XVI

WE TURN AT BAY

I HAD come to a stand again, when, through the perfect silence of that dead hour of night, a faint sound crept to my ears, and I listened eagerly. Far to the south a faint, dull roll of wheels was to be heard. What subtle intuition roused my uneasiness? I know not, but I could think of nothing else but the gloomy coach which had crawled up on just such a night to carry Cicely away to Winchester clink. Had it been the sound of galloping horses there had been better warrant for fear. Yet how, flying by lonely commons and desolate, grass-grown heath-tracks, could we have been traced? 'Twas some impatient traveller taking advantage of the moonlight to perform the first stages of his journey. The sound became more distinct, and I came down from the hill that I might not be seen as the vehicle passed. Suddenly my heart jumped, then seemed to stop dead with fear. For now, rolling over the heath, hollow and menacing, came the deep-throated bay of a questing hound. A second hound answered him, and then there was silence as they came swiftly and steadily along the scent. I darted across the smooth turf towards the tents. Short as was the interval before I reached them there was time to see it all. This was the reason why Colin

Lovel had snatched the old man's neckerchief. Whether the gipsies moved or stayed was all one to him then. He had a sure means of tracking them down.

"Up! Up!" I cried. "Our enemies are close at hand."

The flap of the nearest tent was flung back as I ran to it.

"I heard a dog," said Jasper, creeping out.

"Ay, ay," said I, "the neckerchief! Do you see?"

"I do," said the old gipsy fiercely, springing up to his feet, a long knife in his hand. "How many come?"

"I know not," I answered. "I heard the roll of wheels and the bay of a hound whose nostrils are full of scent."

Those who travel in fear sleep lightly, and my words had aroused all. They had lain down to rest in their clothes, and now Cicely ran to me and took my hand.

"Oh! have they come to seize you?" she cried.

"Nay," said I, "to seize you. But they have not won the game yet."

Again the dreadful baying of the great hounds rang out.

"We are pursued by bloodhounds," cried young Jasper, who now heard them for the first time. Faint cries of terror broke from the women, and I could have groaned with them. A couple of brutes who could pull down a man as a terrier would a rat were enemies dreadful enough, and behind them Kesgrave and his company. The odds were fearful.

"We must separate," said old Jasper in low, swift

[illegible] the dim light of Lydia,
[illegible] to my ears, and I listened eagerly
[illegible] a faint, dull roll of wheels was to be
[illegible] nothing roused my uneasiness?
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[illegible] had crawled up on just such a
[illegible] away to Winchester clink. Had it be
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[illegible] impatient traveller
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[illegible] I might not
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tones. "Those dogs are laid on me. I will take one direction and lead them away. The rest of you must take another."

The devoted old man was about to spring out when I clutched his arm. "Not so," said I; "it is nobly thought of, Jasper, but not so. If we separate we cannot hope to finally hide from them. We shall be the easier dealt with in groups. We must stand together beneath this holly-hedge."

"The Captain is right, father," broke in young Jasper. "A bold front is our only chance now."

The old gipsy shook his head despondently, as he had cause, but he yielded to us, and we formed our line at once. We retreated twenty yards behind the tents to a spot where the holly-hedge was impenetrable from the rear, and the three women stood close into its shelter. We placed ourselves before them, I in the centre. The moon was at our back and we were in deep shade. For arms, I had a sword, my companions each had no more than a long knife and a heavy cudgel. Yet we were resolute to do what might be done with these, and we spoke no word again, but every eye was fixed on the mouth of the glade. The wheels rattled nearer and nearer, hoofs clinked, and again the hounds bayed, but half strangled, as if choking on the leash. The carriage stopped and we heard voices; one cried, "This way!" another, "Let them go. They will but pin the man they're after."

Again the dogs set up their throats, now with a

dreadful eagerness, as if they scented the nearness of their prey. Suddenly their horrible clamour fell with strange suddenness.

"They are loosed," said old Jasper quietly, and licked his palm and gripped his cudgel tighter. I clutched the heavy brass handle till I felt my flesh grow as it were into the folds of the hilt. This was no time for a sword to turn in a man's hand. It must be edge, not flat, at every stroke. We were looking for them, expecting them, yet it was a horrible shock to see the two huge fawn-coloured, black-muzzled brutes glide into the moonlight, their lean bodies loping swiftly along, their great dewlaps brushing the grass as they followed the scent, foam slavering and dropping from their jaws. They were of immense size, and woe betide whatever those vast jaws might seize. They darted like lightning upon the tent in which the old gipsy had been sleeping, but in an instant were out again, nor made the slightest sound. One threw up his nose and made a cast; the other struck the trail as he came out of the tent and ran towards us.

Old Jasper was at my left, and the great, savage brute would be on him in half-a-dozen strides. I stepped forward two swift paces and poised my weapon. The mighty hound threw up his head and saw his prey. His beslavered lips rolled back and his gleaming teeth shone out, his fierce eyes burned with a savage light, and, still without a sound, he reared to his dreadful leap and launched himself full at the old man's throat.

I struck. With all my might I struck. No wrist play here, fair and clean from my loins I drew the sweeping blow, and the noble blade answered to my strength. Midway of its awful spring I caught the ferocious brute; the great sword lighted on the hound's back, and shore its resistless way triumphant through bone and flesh, and the beast fell at our feet, cut into halves. With such vigour had I struck that the weapon after passing clean through the animal's body buried its point deeply in the turf. I had barely recovered it when the second hound, thrown out a little by its cast, was upon us. For an instant it checked at its companion's smoking corpse. Before I could draw a stroke out sprang old Jasper, and his cudgel descended with a dull thud right between the drooping ears, and ere the stunned beast could recover itself the gipsy knives were both buried in its body. It rolled over, and we were rid of the foes we most feared.

"Ay, Captain; what a blow!" murmured old Jasper, as cool as ever, as he wiped his knife on the coat of his fallen enemy. "I'm a glad man that I didn't run." He turned round and waved his hand joyfully to his wife and daughter. "There'll be more than dogs sliced up if these rogues come within reach of the Captain's sword," said he. "You're as safe there as if you stood in a castle."

Cicely reached out her hand, and I took it and kissed it. No one spoke but the old man, and he in a whisper. It was no time to chatter in presence of the foe, and

all felt it. The encounter with the dogs had passed so swiftly that the men hurrying after them only came in sight just as we straightened our line anew. The newcomers were three in number, dressed in rude, coarse clothes, and masked.

"This is cursed queer," said the leading figure, and by his voice I knew him for the Earl's friend. "Split my windpipe, but this is devilish odd. Where are those brutes? Not a sound. Gad, if they were throttling the rogue there'd be some hury-burly for sure, but there's a silence like the dead." He strode forward to the tent and peered in.

"Empty!" he cried. "Where——"

He turned and his voice stopped. He had seen one of the dogs lying on the edge of the moonlight, and now he saw our dark clump. He took off his hat and made a sweeping bow, then waved his glittering sword and laughed.

"Forewarned and forearmed," he cried. "'Twill be a battle *à l'outrance* as I live, and the garrison the stronger by a monstrous big fellow wrapped in a cloak. And the dogs settled by all that's wonderful? Gad! there's zest in the thing after all. The rogues are dangerous." He laughed again and pulled his moustache and flourished his sword as if the adventure were now to his mind. I saw that he was a desperate, gallant young blood who would be an awkward fellow to handle from his mere courage, and I waited the issue of the adventure with anxiety, for I believed him in the

company of two splendid swordsmen. Here I was to find myself wrong. The two silent figures answered in height to the Earl and Colin Lovel, and I had nothing else to go upon. They were, however, but a couple of common fellows, drummed up to a piece of dirty work as I had been. I was to find before long what share the two principals had laid out for themselves to perform.

We stood perfectly still, making not a sound, and the spark advanced, followed by his companions. They paused within half-a-dozen yards of us, just on the other side of the sharp line which the moonlight drew upon the turf. The leader pursed up his lips and whistled in astonishment as he perceived the severed dog, and all three stared eagerly for an instant.

Now I made a great mistake. Their attention was off us for the moment, the moon was in their eyes, we could leap at them from the ambush of the shade, and I thought our advantage lay in a swift, sudden attack. Springing out, I aimed a slashing blow at the biggest of the three; I believed him to be Colin Lovel and dreaded him most. They were on the alert at my first movement, and my blade fell upon two swords, for the Earl's friend was so close that it could hardly be told at which I was driving, and both clashed to meet me. Old Jasper and his son were abreast of me at once, striking in with knife and cudgel, and for a moment the combat was close and savage out in the open. That moment was enough for the quick cunning of the foe

who lay in wait. I heard the women scream in concert behind me, another half-choked shriek, and before I could beat down the sword before me and turn a tall figure darted for the mouth of the glade, bearing a muffled, struggling burden in his arms.

"She is gone! They have seized her!" screamed Ursula.

I cut down the fellow before me and leaped over his body and darted in hot pursuit. "Away with you, Colin," cried a triumphant voice. I knew it well. It was Kesgrave's, and he now sprang to cover the retreat of his man, who bore off Cicely. A great cloak had been flung skilfully over her head and she was pinioned within it. Burdened as he was Colin Lovel ran like a hare, but given a fair field I could have run him down easily.

Kesgrave leapt at me from one side and lunged fiercely at my neck. To save my life I was compelled to pause to check his stroke, and his friend was abreast of him in a moment, and the two of them drove at me. For a few instants I was held upon my guard to keep myself unharmed from the attack of two excellent swordsmen, then the Earl cried, "Hold him awhile, Arthur!" and ran swiftly away. I promptly gave Arthur the flat of my blade across his head and dropped him stunned to the earth and flew after Kesgrave. As I reached the edge of the road I saw him leap into the light travelling carriage, and, at the same instant, down came the postilions' whips on the flanks of the four

horses harnessed to it. Away they scoured at full gallop along the smooth highroad. I redoubled my exertions, and for a moment held the carriage within arm's length. Then it began to draw away from me. The splendid coursers were increasing their speed with every bound and I could do no more. I saw a hand and body thrust from the window, a blinding flash leapt towards me, and a pistol-bullet skimmed through my hair.

I held doggedly on. A second was fired. It missed me. I ran on.

"Go back, gipsy fool!" cried Kesgrave's voice, and no more shots were fired. The carriage was drawing steadily away, yet I as steadily pursued. I ran thus for a mile or more, and now the vehicle was far ahead. I heard feet running behind me and looked round. The Lees, father and son, were coming up. I stood and awaited them.

"And is she in yonder carriage?" cried the old man.

"Yes," said I.

"Then to run after it is useless, Captain," said he. "I feared as much, but we followed on."

"Where are your wife and daughter?" I asked.

"They slipped away into the heath to hide. Trust them, they're safe enough," replied old Jasper. "As for those other three fellows, two of them are down, and one ran. What now, Captain?"

"You must go back and see after your women-folk," I said. "I will go on, and a thousand thanks to you for your goodness."

They wished to come with me, but I would not hear of it. Matters had arrived at a desperate pass, and to be seized in my company would be destruction to them. That I was likely enough to betray myself I saw plainly, for beard Kesgrave I must: I had no other line open to me.

I parted from the Lees and went swiftly down the Great North Road towards London. The sound of the wheels had died away in the distance, and I walked and ran, ran and walked mile after mile through the moonlight until houses began to line the way and I reached town again. I hurried through street and square till I stood once more before Kesgrave's house. I looked eagerly up at the windows. Everything was dark and silent save for the shine of a lamp in the hall. I had started my journey back with my brain on fire. Had I ended it as furiously as I had begun I had charged at the door and attempted to beat it down with my sword. But I was now master of myself again and knew that caution, not fury, must be the word. Otherwise I might only harm myself mortally and do Cicely no good. I thought of the window at which I had escaped and wondered if it had been secured. I climbed the hedge and dropped into the shrubbery, climbed the high wall with some difficulty, and found myself in the passage beside the house. The window was ajar just as I had left it. Most likely on finding I had gone Kesgrave had set my escape down to a drunken freak and given no more thought to the matter. I stripped

off my sword and shoes, flung aside my cloak, and swung myself up to the window. In another moment I was in the armoury. Moving noiselessly in my stockings, I approached the door which led into the Earl's cabinet. It was not closed and a gleam of firelight shone at the opening. I glanced through and saw an empty room, a bright fire crackling on the hearth, and two tall, unlighted candles standing on the table. The place had the air of being prepared for the return of someone still absent. I entered the cabinet. The door leading to the hall was closed, and I turned the handle very slowly and gently, opened it, and peeped out. I saw the great empty hall, a fire dying on its broad hearth, a lamp burning on the wall, and a fat, elderly hall-porter drowsing in his big chair. There was the most perfect repose about the whole house, and with it an air that there were people still to come. Perhaps they had not arrived? Perhaps they were not coming here?

I was still drawing a breath of uneasiness over this fancy when I heard the clatter of feet on the steps outside, and the next moment someone rapped loudly on the door. The nodding porter leapt to his feet and ran to open. He flung the leaves of the door back, and in came Kesgrave followed by Colin Lovel. No one else appeared, and the door was shut and fastened behind them.

Where was Cicely? I was so surprised that I stood staring at them until Kesgrave turned and came swiftly

towards his cabinet with Colin Lovel at his heels. Then I turned and darted, just in time, into the armoury.

They entered the cabinet, and Kesgrave flung himself into a chair beside the fire while Colin Lovel lighted the candles. Then they began to converse, but in tones so low that I could catch nothing of their speech. The Earl seemed to be giving a host of directions and Lovel commenting on them.

I was more than a little puzzled what to do. Cicely was not here, so much was certain. How, then, to discover the nook in which they had bestowed her?

Suddenly the conference before me was broken up; the two men left the room, and I heard their footsteps die away along the hall. In another moment the sleepy porter came, blew out the candles, gave a glance at the fire to see that nothing could do mischief, and followed them.

I was now left alone in the darkened and silent house. So I returned to the window and swung myself out. I took my sword, shoes, and cloak and made my way to the shrubbery and next to the road. I could see nothing for it but to watch the Earl, to see whither he went, and that meant watching the house without an instant's break. I wished for Jan, who, in these matters, had a gift beyond price, and, for a moment, I had half a mind to go back to my lodgings to see if he had turned up there, but I feared to leave the place.

I kept my vigil at some little distance, and, lest I should be espied, under a thick patch of shade. The

moon sank lower and lower, but before I lost her light the east was paling with the dawn. Next the sun came up bright and clear and the wind stirred among the trees and yellow leaves fluttered to my feet. Now the day was broad I hid behind the clump of bushes and watched the house through a thin place.

A figure came in sight in the distance and my heart jumped in my breast. Could it be Jan? I peered out eagerly, and Jan it was. He came down the road slowly, and, as he passed the house, I saw his eyes darting out keen glances on every side. As he drew near I gave a soft whistle. He edged up to my covert, saw me, and went steadily on. He turned a corner into a path bordered by high hedges and disappeared. I waited a little, and then went after him. He had come to a stand within a yard of the entrance, and sprang upon me at once, his eyes glittering with impatience and excitement.

"Captain!" he cried eagerly in a low, eager voice, "where, where have you been? I've been waiting about your lodgings all of a passion to see you come and no sign of you."

"What do you know, Jan?"

"Everything," he replied. "I can take you to the house where they carried Miss Cicely as straight as a string. At last I thought you'd worked back here again maybe, and glad I am I came to see."

He hurried swiftly along the sheltered path, and I followed joyfully at his heels.

"Jan! Jan!" I cried, "are you sure it is true? Are you certain you know the place? It seems too good to be true."

"It's as true as we're marching along here, Captain," said Jan, nodding over his shoulder, "and I'll bring you there in thirty minutes from now as sure as a gun."

He said no more, but stepped out briskly until we came to the mouth of the passage and into the open street again. Then he moderated his pace and we walked abreast, and he told me his story.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DESERTED HOUSE AT CHELSEY

"You know, Captain," said Jan, "you left me to watch yonder house. Well, the first to move was Colin Lovel with two great hounds in a leash, and away he went, whither I knew not for the present. Next a light carriage with four horses drove out of the courtyard. The windows were up and I could not see who was inside, but I felt sure that none but the Earl himself would move out like that, and I followed it. Lucky for me it didn't go fast and I remembered what you had said about Enfield; so when I saw which road it was moving I took ways a good deal shorter, and sure enough, when I got out into the open country and was well on the main road the carriage came up behind and passed me. I walked easily till it was out of sight, then followed it at a run. Soon it grew dark and I could pursue without having to peep carefully round every bend. Then it went faster and got clear away from me. I found when I reached Enfield it had passed straight through, and on I went and almost ran bang into the carriage half a mile farther. It was standing drawn into the hedge, and if I hadn't been moving as softly as a cat the two men who had got out and stood talking in the road would have seen me. But I managed to drop

under a furze-bush and lay snug and still. In half an hour again up came Colin Lovel with his dogs and a couple of men. In a little while I heard laughing and someone crying, 'Gone away, Tally Ho!' and soon they started. I followed behind the carriage and could tell by the whimpering of the dogs they were on some scent. I kept up with them for a long time, till at last we all turned on the Great North Road, and away they went full tilt. As for me, I followed no farther, for I should have been seen at once on the wide, empty highway. So I saved my breath and sat down thinking it was likely they would come back. And sure enough, in about an hour I heard horses' feet pounding on the road like fury and coming towards me. There was a steep hill about a quarter of a mile away going towards London, and I ran for it. I put my best foot foremost, too, but they were going at such a pace that I did no more than reach it first, though I had a long start. As I had expected, the hill checked them, and they took it gently. As they passed me at a dark bend where the trees were thick on both sides I slipped behind and swung myself on to the place where they carry luggage, and when they reached the top of the hill and went away again at full gallop they carried me with them sitting at my ease. At a glance I knew it again for the same carriage."

"Did you hear any sound inside?" I asked.

"Not a sound, sir," he said; "all was as silent as possible. Well, I rode snugly with them into London, and when they reached the houses they went quietly

like belated travellers, and so I dropped off again and followed at a distance. I expected them to come to my Lord's house there, but instead they went to a queer, deserted house in the fields, out Chelsey way."

"Out Chelsey way," I repeated, a light breaking upon me.

"Yes," went on Jan, "and when I saw the carriage drawing up I was luckily on the same side of the way. Some people came out and hurried up the steps. I saw a woman's dress and heard a woman's voice among them, and I felt certain it must be Miss Cicely. I couldn't see anything else for it."

"You're quite right, Jan," said I; "it was."

"Ay, ay, sir," said he. "Well, the carriage drove away and I waited. In less than ten minutes my Lord and his man came out and walked sharply home. I tracked them there, then went hot foot to your lodgings hoping to catch you or hear something of you, and there I was fretting myself until I thought perhaps you'd come back to yonder place, and so came and found you."

I knew quite well now whither Jan was leading me. Kesgrave possessed a second great house in, or rather near, London. His mother had been the last remaining descendant and heiress of a powerful family, and through her it had come into his possession. It was too far from Covent Garden to be more convenient than his town house; it was too near London to be regarded as a country house. I had heard that it was the Earl's caprice to leave it untenanted.

We turned the flank of a tall grove of limes and Jan lifted his finger.

"There's the place," he said.

I looked, and saw a great mansion marked with every sign of neglect and decay. The walls were green with moss and stained with damp. The windows, above all, had that forlorn, sluttish look of a deserted house. We were now in a lane which ran towards the back of the place. Tall pales shut off the lane from a shrubbery which lay between the road and the building. We went a little way down the lane, stopped, and looked about us. Everything was silent, there was no sign of any human presence in the neighbourhood. At this point one or two pales were broken. I pulled a couple more from their fastenings and we entered the shrubbery. The trees, unpruned and luxuriant, afforded us an ample cover, and we moved cautiously in their shelter until we stood close under the walls and gazed eagerly up at the windows about us. Some were heavily shuttered, some ironed.

"We can never break into this place unseen in open daylight, Jan," said I.

"That depends upon where we make a trial, Captain," he replied. "'Twould be foolish, for sure, to try and force one of these windows when people might pass or be about any minute now. But wait here a little."

He slipped away among the tangle of shrubbery, and I waited patiently ten minutes or more staring up at the great, deserted mansion and hoping that Cicely was

no farther from me than the other side of the massive walls which towered above my head. Then Jan came back and beckoned me with a satisfied grin and nod. He led the way cautiously to a spot where a grating was set in the wall, its lower bar flush with the ground outside. I knelt down and peeped into a cellar upon which the grating gave. A number of billets of wood still lay piled on one side as they had been stored for firing. I seized the grating and shook it carefully. It was fastened with a strong chain and padlock, and to displace the fastening was impossible. Jan whipped out a knife and began to scrape at the bottom of one of the bars. Rust had eaten deeply into it, and a red shower fell fast before his swift scratching. I motioned him to stand aside, then set my foot for a purchase against the bottom of the grating, took a good grip of the bar just above its weakest point, and put out my whole strength. For a while it resisted firmly, and then I felt it give. I brought my other foot forward and hung back, tugging with every ounce of weight and strength I possessed. The iron rod snapped and bent outwards, for it was sound and held firmly at the top. I stood up and pulled it at right angles to the wall. Then I fetched a few deep breaths and rested while Jan went to work at the next and scraped away the rust from that. I snapped and bent that too, and the next, and the next. It was a great assistance to me that the damp earth had been washed against the grating by heavy rains, and in consequence rust had eaten deeply

into the lower end of every bar. There was now ample room for us to descend into the cellar, and down slipped Jan first and I followed him. Save for the billets it was empty, and we crossed to a door in full view at the farther end, for the grating afforded an ample light. I turned the handle of the door and found it was not locked. It led to a flight of narrow, winding steps, up which I trod carefully, Jan at my heels. A door stood ajar at the head of the steps, and I peered through it and saw a great, empty kitchen. It was marked by such unmistakable signs of desolation and desertion that we trod boldly in and looked around us. The windows, thickly grimed with dirt, were unshuttered but strongly ironed without. Dust stood deep upon everything, upon the massive tables, upon the large clumsy chairs and dressers, their once bright surface now hidden by the sluttish mantle. The bars of the huge fireplace, the spits before it, the chains which led from the spits to the smoke-jack in the chimney, were coated with rust.

"There's been nobody here for many a day, Captain," whispered Jan.

"No one," I replied, and looked round for the next step. Besides the door at which we had entered we saw three others: two large ones opposite the windows, one small one near at hand. The large doors led to the main body of the house, their position showed that; but what of the small one? Jan opened it, and we saw another flight of steps running down.

"More cellars, I shouldn't wonder," said Jan, and

went to see. He was back in a moment. It was as he had said. I crossed the room and tried the other doors. Both were locked. It was easy to make out that the ponderous bolts were shot home, for the doors were far from fitting closely. There were no keys in the locks, but nothing could be seen beyond save in either case a dusky passage. Between the doors a mighty cleaver hung upon the wall. I took it from its hook and gave it a half flourish round my head and looked at Jan. He shook his head.

"If you let fly, Captain," he said softly, "that door would go like a bit of paper, but you'd make too much noise. If we can't do any better, why, it can come to that in the end, but we'll be as quiet as we can till there's nothing else for it."

Jan was right, and I hung the cleaver up again. We searched the cellars to see if any other way from them existed, but, as was natural, they communicated only with the kitchen. It was a vast, gloomy apartment, this kitchen. As in very old houses, the windows were but small and so barred as to intercept half the light. Much of the remainder was lost among the great festoons of cobwebs which hung across the tiny panes, and I began to search every inch of the place, sometimes by touch rather than sight, to see if any other outlet existed. In the darkest corner I saw a curtain hanging against the wall. I took hold of it to draw it aside, but it was so moth-eaten that it gave way at a touch and tore across at the top, and fell and hung in my hand. Its fall disclosed a

little door over which it had been drawn. I turned the handle. The door was unlocked, and I drew a deep breath of thankfulness. I felt certain in an instant what I had discovered. It was the private staircase by which the lady of the house came to the kitchen to overlook the economy of her household, and the steps before me would lead of a surety to the heart of the mansion.

I drew off my shoes, tied them together, and hung them round my neck, and Jan hastened to do the same. Then he came to me, and waved his hand joyfully at sight of the open door. We crept softly up. The stairs wound and wound about, and creaked till we were terrified at the noise we made, yet the most perfect silence reigned when we stayed to listen, and at last we came to another little door at the top. Here again there was a most cautious peeping followed by a bold entrance, for it opened into an apartment as desolate and empty as the kitchen below. On every side of the octagon was a door; the place seemed a central knot from which passages led from every part, and, for our purpose, a most convenient spot to have discovered. Some of the doors were locked, some were not. The unlocked ones I tried in turn, the first leading to a long gallery where dusty portraits hung in rows, their painted eyes following us as we moved past, as if demanding by what right we intruded upon their domain; the second to a labyrinth of small rooms, servants' places and the like; and the third to a large sleeping apartment. The fourth admitted us to a narrow matted passage, smelling intol-

erably musty. The farther mouth of the passage was closed by a curtain. I pushed it aside and found myself in a gallery along the front of which another curtain was drawn. The size of the place, the gallery itself, the dim light pouring through stained-glass windows, told me at once I had reached the chapel. I turned and saw Jan at my shoulder, his lips opening to speak. Suddenly I raised my finger sharply, though I saw by his eyes the caution was not needed. A vigorous "Hem!" from someone below rang through the place. Had a pistol been discharged at my ear I could scarcely have been more startled. The place seemed so lifeless, so desolate, that that brisk sound of life had a most surprising effect. It seemed to pluck at one's nerves as sharply as a player plucks at the tight-drawn strings of a mandolin. I crept softly forward and peeped through a rent in the curtain, hoping to catch sight of him who cleared his pipes so confidently, and I saw the man plainly. To my surprise it was a clergyman in full canonicals, a big, flourishing parson in great, white peruke, and spotless bands and flowing robes, clean and shining, the greatest contrast in his bravery to the dingy, dusty chapel which he slowly paced, his finger thrust in a book as if to keep a place.

More, I knew him. He went commonly by the name of "Parson Hazard," being a passionate gambler and devoted to that game, which he followed madly as long as he could raise a penny piece, and when he had no cash he was ever found watching more fortunate players.

His real name I shall not write. Since those days he has deserted the green-table and obtained good preferment. He now lives in an odour, if not of sanctity, yet of respectability, which I do not care to disturb. I have heard that he spent his youth as chaplain in a great family, where his patrons were devotees of the card-table, and this, till he was removed from their influence, was his ruin.

Matters stood thus for some minutes, Parson Hazard moving up and down a clear space before the altar below and we peering at him from above, when of a sudden the clergyman turned his head and looked down the chapel, as if he heard someone approaching. In another moment an old woman with smooth white hair and handsomely dressed came up towards him, and he smiled.

"Well, madam," said he, "and is your charge in a more amenable frame of mind?"

"I can scarcely say that," she replied; "she seems strangely insensible to the honour intended her."

"It's a queer thing certainly," chuckled Parson Hazard. "I know ladies of high degree who would give their ears almost to become Countess of Kesgrave, were it only to plunge their fingers into my Lord's deep coffers to meet their losses at play; but that a young person in little better than rags should object seems to me passing strange. 'Twill be a lively day at Court when he comes to present her." And Parson Hazard laughed roundly.

"My Lord Kesgrave pursues his own fancies without regard to other persons' opinions," said the old lady stiffly.

"Why, as to that, dame," said Parson Hazard, "he can do as he likes for me. He has offered me a great sum to marry him here in an odd fashion this morning. What care I? I might have refused indeed had not luck cleared me out of my last farthing. But as it is, I shall marry him truly and tightly. I told him plainly I'd take no hand in hanky-panky work. I'll play no tricks in my gown—that's going too far."

While the careless, jovial chaplain was saying this and pacing idly about the chapel, the old woman was watching him, and, her face being in full view, I was watching her. An egg is no fuller of meat than was her face of evil. It was in her thin lips, now curved in a smooth, sneering smile as she listened to his heedless, outspoken talk; it was in her wrinkles, everyone of which was unkindly; it was above in her dark eyes, peering edgewise at Parson Hazard, and her satirical, lifted brows.

"I think it would be an excellent thing, to make matters easier, your reverence," she said, in a soft tone, "if you told the young woman of these matters yourself. She would then see she was to be dealt honestly by."

"Bring her here," he cried, "bring her into this chapel and let her perceive for herself that all is being done decently and in order; that she will leave this

place an honoured wife. It shall be my care to reassure her."

The old woman slipped away, and I had a pause to collect myself. It was a marriage that was in hand. The Earl of Kesgrave of the one part and of the other —who? I had no doubts on this score, and waited eagerly to see my love appear. Suddenly I found Jan's mouth at my ear. "Whatever happens, Captain," he breathed in a voice as much below a whisper as a whisper is below a shout, "let all their cards be on the table before we move, or, mayhap, we'll spoil everything."

I nodded my agreement to my wise Jan's strategy, and looked eagerly again at my rent of the curtain.

"Come, come, my girl," called out the parson cheerily down the chapel, "do not fear anything. I assure you that honest dealings are meant for you."

A tall, slender figure came into sight and moved swiftly up to him. I had to hold myself down by main force, as it were. It would have been so easy to swing myself over the gallery and drop down at her side. But we were walking a narrow and dangerous way, and for her sake, above all, I kept a strong command upon myself and waited to see how things would go.

"Sir," said Cicely, "by what right am I detained here?"

"Faith, my girl," said he, "I thought you had settled that with his Lordship. So I understood. At any rate, you need be under no uneasiness. I perceive your

suspicions. In the circumstances they are not unnatural. But there is no bogus work about this, I assure you. I will marry you as truly and tightly as ever woman was married. I am So-and-so, chaplain to the Earl of Such-and-such."

I do not, as I said before, write such names as will identify Parson Hazard, but he gave them roundly, his own and his patron's name, and that he spoke truly I know very well.

"I do not follow you," returned Cicely. "Why should you try to reassure me as regards suspicions which I have never entertained, and which I do not understand? I do not think you can marry me against my will."

Parson Hazard turned and looked at her fixedly. Her face was still screened by her cloak in a great measure, but the voice had astonished him. Perchance at her first speech he had not remarked the rare sweetness of her utterance, the purity of her accent. Certainly, he had observed them now, as one saw by his interested look, by the surprise which shone in his eyes.

"Do I understand that this marriage is forced upon you?" he said. "I fancied it was a mere freak on the part of his Lordship in which you joined, greatly to your advantage."

"To my advantage!" said Cicely, dropping her cloak. "It is most repugnant to me. I was carried away by him from my friends last night, but endure the form of a marriage with him I will not."

Parson Hazard was staring at her open-mouthed. Then he recovered himself with a start. His former manner was gone, as if its careless patronage had never been.

"Madam," said he, "there is more here than I can fathom. I took you for a person of low degree. I understood so. I ask your pardon."

The last words were on his lips when a rattle of feet sounded below us and someone came into the chapel. Cicely turned, and now I saw her face. No wonder Parson Hazard had put a little more polish into his manner. Her lovely face was glowing like the rose. Her courage had risen with the danger which she believed to be all around her, and her eyes sparkled like jewels, her cheeks were filled with brilliant colour, her whole aspect was shining and dauntless.

Parson Hazard bowed as if in answer to a salutation from the newcomer. She did not move, but kept her eyes steadily upon the latter.

"How fortunate that I find you ready!" said a voice below, a voice at which I started, oddly like the Earl's, oddly unlike, a little deeper, a little harsher.

"I fear the young lady is not entirely willing, my Lord," exclaimed Parson Hazard.

My Lord stepped forward, and I ground my teeth in a spasm of rage and indignation. My eyes could not be deceived. Here was no Earl of Kesgrave, here was Colin Lovel in his stead and in his guise. Lovel wore a magnificent suit of sea-green velvet, richly embroi-

dered. All his fineries were of the completest, the most splendid. The handle of his sword blazed with diamonds, a great ruby shone on either foot in his shoe-buckle, his fingers were loaded with rings. Apart from the Earl, his slightly greater height and bulk did nothing to betray him, but I had seen them together too often and studied them too closely to be deluded. I knew him for Colin Lovel by a dozen signs.

CHAPTER XVIII

PARSON HAZARD STANDS OUR FRIEND

It may argue great simplicity on my part, especially among those who know the world, when I confess, as I must, that I was astonished beyond measure at this foul trick being offered. I had believed that Kesgrave himself would come without fail to this forced bridal. I had not dreamed but that he would consider the hand of Cicely Plumer a reward great enough for the proudest earl. Now I saw that he was a knave in grain. The whole plot flashed through my mind. At this moment, without doubt, the Earl was showing himself at some distant spot, so that no marriage could be proved against him even if Parson Hazard were willing to testify to it. It was easy for the dullest to see to what use he intended to put the likeness his half-brother bore to him. At the idea of this vile plot against my love, a plot laid at once against her peace of mind, her name, against all that made life sweet and of good repute, my blood surged into flame and I could hold back no longer.

I tore the mouldering curtain aside, swung myself over the gallery rail, and sprang full upon the counterfeit Earl as he stood almost directly below me. Parson Hazard set up a shout of surprise at my appearance and

pointed. Colin Lovel glanced up, but could do no more. Before he had time to move I dropped clean upon him, my knees falling upon his shoulders, and down we crashed on the floor, he underneath. His body broke my fall, and I was up in an instant and had my knee in his back and my hands about his throat. But I had no desperate foe to contend with at present. My weight and the flying impetus of my leap had beaten the breath out of him, and he had struck his head, too, against the end of an oaken seat. He lay stunned and helpless.

"Keep the door, Jan!" I cried, and Jan, who had dropped from the gallery after me, darted to the door and stood on guard.

"George!" cried Cicely, and flew down the chapel towards me. I smiled up at her, but I looked down again as Lovel stirred under my knee. I dragged his hands back and bound them behind him with his own cravat. I took a firm grip of his splendid coat, tore a great strip out of it, and bound his ankles, then tossed him on one side.

All this passed so quickly that Parson Hazard had only time to recover from his astonishment and advance towards us as I straightened myself and put my arms round Cicely.

"Who are you?" said he. "And what does this mean? Have you killed him?"

"Far from it," I replied; "you see, he begins to stir now."

I looked about the place and marked that the finely-dressed old woman had not escaped. Jan, too, was watching her. There was neither sign nor sound of any creature about the place save we who stood in the chapel.

Parson Hazard came nearer.

"Make room," he cried, "and let me pass! Here is strange villainy."

"You speak very truly," said I, "but not on our part, nor indeed, I believe, on yours. I beg of you to listen for a moment, and you shall be satisfied on every score."

Parson Hazard looked keenly at me.

"You people are not what you seem?" he said.

"We are not," I returned. "We are quite other than we seem. I enjoyed, in more fortunate days, the pleasure of your acquaintance, yet I scarce think you can name me now."

"No riddles," said Parson Hazard. "Speak out."

"I will," said I. I had resolved to confide in him. "We have the misfortune to find every man's hand against us."

"You are obnoxious to the law, then?" he asked.

"We are," I replied. "I am George Ferrers of Whitemead, in Hampshire."

"Captain Ferrers! Captain Ferrers!" murmured Parson Hazard. "Ay, ay, you have his bigness and figure, and now I know it I can recognise your features. It was said on every hand you had fled. Why on earth

have you tarried in this country? Your life is not worth a penny piece." He looked upon me in utter astonishment.

Before I could take up the word Cicely broke in. "The fault is mine," she said. "Captain Ferrers would have been far from danger if he had not stayed to search for and help me. Oh, sir, help us to escape. Your sacred office calls upon you to assist those who are helpless and in distress. We have done nothing that we can recognise as crime. We have but fed the starving and brought help to the sick and needy."

Parson Hazard bowed gravely. I saw he was deeply affected. He would have been of other clay than man is made of had he remained unmoved. The words I have written were nothing to the manner in which Cicely uttered them. Her low voice, full of music, her lovely face, now pale, now rosy with flushes of flying colour, her great lustrous eyes full of pleading. Parson Hazard glanced from one to the other of us. I saw the unspoken question in his look.

"We are plighted lovers," I said, and told him who Cicely was and sketched her adventures in a few words. "The Earl of Kesgrave was my rival," I added. These words caused him to look down on the bound figure.

"This is not he," said I; "this is his man, Colin Lovel, his body-servant."

"Not the Earl, not the Earl?" repeated Parson Hazard. "Why, it must be. I have seen him half-a-dozen times."

"Then you have never seen him and his man together," I returned, "or the wonderful resemblance between them would have shown you how easy it is for one to personate the other."

Parson Hazard's face grew very red. I am certain that he was and is a perfectly honest man, and if he had a weakness for play, be sure there are plenty of his cloth who have it too, without the qualities which redeemed his character.

"How—how?" he cried out. "This is a very serious thing you are saying. I fully believed it was the Earl. If it is not, here has been a foul plot hatched, and a fine share in it assigned to me." He turned to the old woman.

"Who is this?" he demanded. "You must know. Is this your master or not?"

She had seated herself very comfortably and was watching all that went on. She made no answer, only laughing maliciously and shrugged her shoulders.

"I will offer a final proof," said I; "only yesterday afternoon I played a backsword match with this very man and touched him on the forearm and shoulder. The wound must be green yet. Jan, can you fasten that door?"

"The key is in the lock, Master George."

"Well, turn it, and put it in your pocket, and come hither."

Parson Hazard was whistling through his teeth. "Why," said he, "all the town was ringing with the

affair last night. It was said that a porter and the Earl's man fought with the backsword, and the Earl betted five thousand guineas on his man's head and lost the wager."

"I was that porter," said I, "and there lies the man. He touched me once, here's the cut"—I showed my sword wrist—"I touched him twice. The wounds will speak for themselves. Jan, strip off his coat."

It was done in a twinkling. Colin Lovel was still too dazed with the ringing crack his head had fetched against the bench to offer opposition. Next the shirt was torn aside as it was fast at his wrists. The two cuts were plainly to be seen, they were so slight he had not troubled to dress them.

"Do you still hold doubts?" I asked.

"It is impossible," said Parson Hazard. "It all tallies. Upon my soul, Captain, I am heartily sorry for your plight."

He had a good heart in his bosom, had Parson Hazard. His concern was unfeigned. No hypocrite could have looked upon us with that pity which filled his honest eyes, which clouded his open, English brow. He faced round so that his broad back was towards the old woman.

"Is there aught I can do for you?" he whispered. "What do you think of attempting?"

"We can do nothing but fly as far and as fast as we can," said I.

"Do you fly together?" he said.

"Of a surety," I replied. "'Tis sink or swim with us now, and hand-in-hand we must go to it."

I drew Cicely a little closer, and she pressed against me and looked up into my face with a heavenly smile.

"Then," said Parson Hazard, "you must be married."

We looked at him and each other.

"I am quite serious," said he, wagging his great peruke; and he held up thumb and forefinger. "If you do not come clear, which God forbid, but everything must be looked at—if you do not come clear, I say"—tapping his thumb now—"no harm has been done. It may even be a comfort to you. On the other hand"—tapping his forefinger—"if you do come clear, as many have done out of as desperate strait, and God grant it I say heartily, you will bless me a thousand times over for saving you from the assault of foul, railing tongues. You know the world, Captain. It blackens the whitest thought, puts ever the worst construction on the most innocent act; and you are young, you have a long time to live in it after these dark days are overpast."

"You are right," I said, "you are very right."

I thought for a moment.

"We have no license," I went on, "and where dare I show myself to get one?"

"Parson Hazard" drew up his gown and thrust a hand into his coat pocket. He fetched out a large shagreen pocket-case, spread it, and showed half-a-dozen blank licenses.

"I am never without them," he said. "I am a surrogate. My patron obtained the post for me in this deanery. The sale of these furnishes me with a full half of my subsistence, though, I assure you," he added as if in self-defence, "I do not hold a public market for them as many surrogates do."

There was a standish near, with ink and quills, and he began to fill in the license, asking me the usual questions. These I could answer freely and truthfully, that both parties were consenting, that there was no impediment, and so forth, and then I asked a question myself.

"And a license taken out thus," said I, "will it hold fully and everywhere?"

"Fully and everywhere," repeated Parson Hazard, casting pinches of sand upon the wet ink. "Ordinarily I may not act out of my court; but upon necessity such action as this is completely covered by the clause in my patent *aut per se, aut per sufficientes deputatos.* It will stand beyond challenge in any diocese in England. The practice is as common as the calling of banns."

I looked at Cicely. We spoke no words to each other. Our eyes met, and we knew that we were ready to link our fates even at this dark, hopeless moment.

"Come to the altar," said Parson Hazard in a deep, solemn voice, and we followed him. We knelt before him and were married then and there. I had Cicely's little ring safely about me and was ready with it when

the time came to place it on the book, and so it went back to her finger as her wedding-ring.

"I will spare you the homilies," said Parson Hazard as we rose and stood again, Cicely trembling on my arm. "This is surely no convenient occasion. Captain, you must go and lock up this place, so that none of us can escape."

"You as well?" said I in surprise.

"I most certainly," he replied; "I must figure as the captive of your bow and spear. In no other way can I save my credit. As for marrying you, how dared I refuse anything to so redoubtable a swordsman armed with a weapon which could fell Behemoth?"

"It seems most ungrateful," I said.

"Ay, but we have to do the best we can for ourselves all round," returned the good parson. "Come, make the place tight and be going. Every moment is precious to you. If these folks say naught, be sure I shall say naught, but the service has given them your names pat enough, and once they are loose they can raise all London on you. I warn you no hue-and-cry flies to-day like one against a rebellion affair. Do you and your man see to your business while I see to mine."

Everything had been provided for making a record of the marriage, and he took pen and paper to draw out a certificate of the ceremony, while Jan and I made swift search to see that no other doors opened from the chapel save the one below and that which led to the gallery. There were none, and Jan swarmed into

the gallery, locked the door there and brought away the key.

As I went down the chapel my eye fell upon Colin Lovel. He had fully recovered his senses, had dragged himself to the wall near the spot where he fell, and was leaning back in a sitting position. His eye burned furiously as it encountered mine, but his voice had its usual cool insolence.

"So, Captain, it was you all the time, was it? A deep and bloody reckoning for this, Captain, a deep and lonely bloody reckoning."

I knew this was likely enough, but I paid no heed to him, and searched busily over the place.

"I feared it, I feared it," said Parson Hazard; "this rogue and his master will set the hue-and-cry on you, Captain."

"That shall we not, Sir Priest," said Colin Lovel haughtily. "We do not hand our revenge over to a dog hangman. If he escapes us, he escapes all. If——" He paused on the word significantly, and then went on: "Fly where you like, 'tis all one to us. You may put the day off a little. You cannot escape us in the end."

"Master," said Jan, "shall I quiet him once for all? He means you desperate mischief, and I had as lief cut his throat as not. 'Tis for our safety."

"Let him be, Jan," said I. "Go through yonder door, have the key in readiness, and wait for us."

"Away with you," said Parson Hazard, "and good luck go with you. Stay no longer. If some person sent

to report the progress of affairs should come, it might easily happen that your escape was cut off yet."

This was true, and we made a hasty leave-taking of the good man, for so I will call him though he would cheerfully wager the gown on his back. We locked the door, and Jan pointed to a staircase running up to the left.

"Does not that seem to run towards the matted passage which led to the chapel, Captain?" he said.

"It does," I replied. "We will try it. The way we came in is certainly the quietest road out."

We went up the steps, and at the top found, as we had hoped, a door opening into the matted passage. We hurried along it to the kitchen, thence to the cellar, where Jan ran swiftly across the floor and sprang through the grating.

"All quiet," he said as we approached, and I helped Cicely through. We threaded swiftly the tangled maze of shrubbery back to the broken palings, and stepped into the lane, which was as solitary as ever. Jan, his rags and tatters fluttering in the fresh morning wind, went ahead as guide. Cicely took my arm and we stepped quickly after him.

"Oh," she whispered, "to think of this! I never dreamt of so happy, so fortunate an ending to this miserable adventure. How did you know where I was?"

I told her how Jan had tracked the carriage, and then she told her story. Save for the forcible removal to the carriage no incivility had been offered to her, and she

had been lodged in the desolate old house under the care of the woman now locked up in the chapel. Besides her, Cicely had not seen a soul about the place.

"Oh, a horrible old woman she was!" said Cicely, shuddering.

"Never mind, dearest," said I; "here we are safe and sound for the moment, and that's something. Now, what shall we do?"

"What do you think best?" she asked.

"We must shake the dust of England from our feet in some fashion or other," said I, "or we are lost."

"Do you think that man spoke the truth?" she said.

"About their purpose?" I returned. "Why, I am half inclined to think it likely. It would be quite to their minds. I only hope he did. For it would mean a slow, leisurely tracking of us down, and much might happen in that time. Whereas if the hue-and-cry is raised against us every time-hole is stopped at a breath."

"Oh!" she said softly, "and I am leading you into all this danger. You might have been safely away in that ship you sent Tom Torr off in."

"Do you suppose," I cried, "I'd exchange this moment for all the safety in the world? No, my love, it was right I should be here, and here I am. No more of that. All's well at present, and surely we have some hours' law. It will be odd if we cannot use them to show a clean pair of heels."

While we talked we had been moving swiftly back

towards London, and soon came among houses. Here Cicely took her hand from my arm, but we were not long in public streets where we ran the risk of notice, for Jan, who knew every highway, byway, court, and blind alley, led us by obscure routes until we came to the place where I lodged.

Luckily, there was no one at home but the widow who kept the house, a decent, trusty woman, and I begged her to provide us with a meal. While it was preparing I took stock of my forces, and found I had, what with my little store in hand, what with Major Temple's purse, what with Sir Peter's five guineas, a total sum of forty-three guineas and some shillings. To be sure, it was no great amount to travel abroad upon, but needs must when such reasons drive. I had talked on the road with Cicely as to what we should do, and now she went out with Jan as guide to buy necessaries for the journey. I went on my own account to the shop whence Jan had fetched my porter's rig and where every kind of cast clothes was to be obtained. Here I bought a grey suit, ill-fitting it is true, but as I had my long, hanging coat to cover all, it mattered but little. Further, I furnished myself with a bobwig and some other trifles, and when I had returned, trimmed my ragged hair, and attired myself in my newly purchased clothes, I had the air of a decent citizen of the middle orders.

CHAPTER XIX

ON BOARD THE "LUCKY VENTURE."

WITHIN a couple of hours we were on the march again, Jan carrying our slight baggage, and our faces turned towards the river. We went down to the nearest stairs, hired a boat, and bade the waterman pull for the Pool of London.

After we passed London Bridge I kept my eyes about me, and presently, near the Tower stairs, saw a ship in that bustle and confusion which mark the nearness of departure. We landed, I paid the man, and then we went to the quay beside which the ship lay. Here people were running to and fro with bags and bales, carrying them to the ship, where the seamen received them and stowed them away, or rolling barrels up the gangway, which creaked and lurched as the vessel rose on the tide, and shouting and calling orders one against the other, while the captain stood at the head of a flight of stairs running from the deck to a platform above, and roared loudest of all.

I stood to look on for a moment, and in that instant made myself a friend. At the forepart of the ship a party of sailors were busy with the rigging. What exactly they were doing I cannot say, for my ignorance of a ship and its handling is almost complete. Yet I

saw this plainly that one man on the quay was hauling on a stout rope hoping to pull a spar within reach of his friends on the ship.

"Pull harder, Jack!" they shouted.

He put his feet against the mooring-post and pulled with all his strength, but the stubborn spar still swung beyond their reach. I stepped forward and took a grip of the rope and hauled with him, and we had it down in no time.

"Well hauled, brother," growled the seaman, loosing the rope and fetching a deep breath as his friends secured the spar. "Well hauled, I say. And thank ye kindly for your aid."

"You are very welcome," I replied. "Will you tell me what ship is this and whither she is bound?"

"The *Lucky Venture,* bound for Lisbon."

"And does she go thither straight?"

"Oh, no; we put in at Calais, Nantes, and Bordeaux."

"And when do you start?"

"Within the turn of the tide, an hour hence."

I thanked him for his information and returned to Cicely, and told her what I had learned. "I had a hundred times rather find a ship going to Holland," I said, "but time is precious, and here is a ship casting loose in an hour. Better for us to be set adrift in France than be clapped into bilhoes at home."

She looked up at me from under her deep hood and her eyes spoke for her.

"I do but jest," I said. "It is a chance we ought

not to let slip. I will go and bargain with the captain."

I went at once, and was lucky enough to find him at leisure for the moment.

"Can you carry my wife and myself across to Calais?" I said.

"Why," said he, "you could not have a cabin to yourselves, but here are some other women crossing, and your wife can go with them if you will be content with rougher quarters."

"Anything will do for me," said I.

"Where is your baggage?" he asked; "there is but little time to spare if you are not ready."

"We are quite ready," I replied. "There stands my wife and the porter has the baggage." Jan had got himself up very passably as a porter.

The captain rubbed his chin and looked at me with much less favour than he had shown up to that moment. The slenderness of our baggage lay at the bottom of this change.

"What do you charge for the passage?" said I.

He named the sum.

"I will pay you at this moment," said I, and I drew out my purse and proffered him the money.

This made a difference, and his brow cleared. Still, he did not treat me as politely as he had begun by doing, but I cared nothing for his respect or disrespect as long as we had a corner of his ship to cross the narrow seas in, and this was secured.

I returned to the quay and related how things had gone.

"Then I am to carry the things aboard, Master George?" said Jan.

"Yes," said I; "and, Jan, I hope no harm will come to you from helping me."

"Never fear for that, sir," he laughed. "I would, indeed, you were as sure of being as safe wherever you may go as I shall be in London."

Again I attempted to press money on him, but in vain. He refused to take a penny. "No, no," he said, "I can get plenty, and may the same always happen to you. I'll warrant you've little enough, Captain, to be taking such a journey on."

So we could give him nothing but our thanks, and he had those, as he deserved, in full measure. True to his character of porter, he then carried the baggage on the ship, set it down, and departed. Not that he went right away, for we saw him posted in a corner of the quay to see us off.

As we stood on the deck the captain came by and saw us.

"Jack Horne," he cried to a man near at hand, "do you show these people where to stow themselves;" and he gave him some directions.

Jack Horne proved to be my friend of the rope, and he bestirred himself on our behalf with the greatest good nature. He drummed up two of the dames who were going to Calais and repeated what the captain had

said to Cicely sharing their cabin, and they proved good, kindly Englishwomen, very civil and obliging. Next, Jack showed me where to settle myself. Our small preparations were soon completed, and then Cicely and I stood together in a quiet corner of the ship towards the stern and watched the sailors casting loose the great ropes which held the *Lucky Venture* at her moorings beside the quay. Others spread the sails, and as the wind blew gently down the river all was fair for sea.

"Now," I whispered, as with a smooth glide the ship slipped away and the quay seemed to recede, "now we're afloat, and no one can touch us. In the next land we step upon King James's warrants will not run."

Cicely was holding my hand in a fold of her cloak, and she pressed it and nodded joyfully. Soon we were out in mid-river running steadily before the wind. On we went, and the medley of steeples and chimneys behind us grew indistinct and faded in the western sky. We passed Greenwich, and now a cold chill air breathed upon us from the Essex marshes. It marked a change of the wind and checked our headway, so that the vessel scarcely moved through the water. She was not a fast sailer in any case, this broad-beamed merchantman, and as she tacked to and fro her blunt round nose beat upon the waves with a loud swishing noise.

Now that we had seen the city of our dread fade from our sight I began to take more notice of our present quarters. Right amidships was built a sort of house running across the deck from side to side, some nine feet

high, but how deep I could not see from where I stood. To go to the forepart of the ship a broad flight of stairs with a massive handrail ran up on one side and so over the top of this structure. At the door of this place a great heap of luggage was piled, and near at hand a couple of travelling-carriages were tightly lashed to iron rings in the deck. It was clear that some person of consequence was going abroad in the *Lucky Venture;* and now three men in livery came from below and began to arrange the luggage. The livery of gray and silver seemed something familiar to me, but I could not recall in whose service it was worn.

"I half fancy I know that livery," I said to Cicely, "but I cannot just remember where I have seen it."

"Was it in London or the country?" she asked.

"In London," I returned, "and very likely I have seen it in the street behind the coach of some stranger to me."

"Look," she said, "how thick and misty it seems down the river!"

"Thick and misty indeed," said I. "It is an autumn fog coming in from the sea."

The wind died down, the ship lost her way altogether, yet the fog crept on and soon enfolded us thickly. We did not go below, for there it was close, and we had no fancy for company. Cicely's main purchase had been a great cloak and hood, and in these she was wrapped snugly. I had my stout coat of camlet, and we remained by the side of the ship and braved the fog.

Soon a man came and began to coil up a rope trailing from the bulwarks. It was Jack Horne.

"This is thick weather, said I.

"It is, brother," said Jack. "We'll have to lie to till morning if this holds, even if the wind favours us, for we should but knock into somebody in this crowded fairway. Hark to yon!" He lifted his finger, and now we heard a bell tolling heavily through the fog.

"'Tis some vessel lying in the track up and down," he said, "and warning folks to sheer off her."

"What do you call that building reaching across the deck there?" I asked.

"They're the state-rooms," replied Jack, "where the captain berths when we've no quality aboard. But there's a lord and his people in them now. They're going to Calais same as ye."

"What's the lord's name?" I said.

"That I can't tell ye," replied my friend. "I've heard it, true, but forgot it again."

He was now hailed by some officer and ran away, crying, "Ay, ay, sir."

The fog held all the rest of the day and Jack Horne's words proved true. We lay at anchor in the river with bright lights burning and a watch set fore and aft. So it was when night came, and still the warning bell rang out when I lay down to sleep in a hammock which Jack Horne's ready hands swung for me.

I needed little rocking to sleep that night. Many and divers things and frequent journeyings had been

my portion since last I laid down. Indeed, on thinking it over, it seemed strange and wonderful that I had not closed my eyes since the keeper of the coffee-house beckoned me to carry his parcel. It seemed a far-off moment, yet it was but yesterday.

I was wakened the next morning by the plash and dash of water against the planks near my head. My hammock was swinging, and I could tell by the motion of the ship that she was moving steadily forward. I hastened to arrange my dress for the day and was soon on deck. It was still early, but broad daylight, and it was plain that the ship had been sailing for some time, since we were now at the mouth of the Thames and the dim shores trended away northward and southward.

I had slept in the forepart of the ship, and after a glance round at our position hastened to reconnoitre the stern, where Cicely and her travelling companions were bestowed. All was quiet there; indeed no one was moving save the captain and two or three of the seamen. The captain, wrapped in a great frieze coat, stood on the poop and constantly swept the horizon with a perspective glass. Now and again he called out an order anent the sails and the seamen flew to do his bidding. I leaned against the side of the vessel, busy with my own thoughts. These were put to flight soon by seeing Cicely trip up on deck, and I went to meet her.

"Where are we?" she asked. "Have we far to go now?"

"We are just at the mouth of the Thames," I answered, "and have the Straits to cross yet."

She slipped her hand under my arm and we paced about a little, then came to a stand in lee of the deck-house, for a shrewd air was blowing from the northeast.

"And we are now on the open sea?" she said.

"Fairly out," I replied. "Are you a good sailor?"

"Now, how should I know that?" she laughed. "And why should you ask, since you know as well as I do that I have never been on the sea in my life? I feel very well. That is all I can say."

"It is not everyone that is affected by the motion of the sea," said I. "For when I went to Lisbon it did not inconvenience me in the least, and we had some very rough weather."

"How your brows were knitted when I caught sight of you a little while ago!" she said. "Pray, what were you thinking about so diligently?"

"You," said I, "and in what manner I was to maintain a lady of high degree when we got to France."

"A fine lady indeed," she laughed, a blush creeping up her cheek, "a lady in a canvas petticoat and clouted shoes, remember, no longer ago than yesterday."

"Upon my soul," said I, "it never struck me till now what a waster in the world I am. Stripped of my accidents of fortune, what can I turn to? I see nothing for it but a porter's knot again. If I have no wit in earning a livelihood I have strength, and must employ it as best I can."

"But then you must stay in crowded, dirty towns," she said.

"And why not?" I laughed. "What pleasanter than a lively bustling town to folks who have been shut up deep in the country? And again, I am forgetting other ways of earning a living. Should anyone wish to learn how to manage a horse or handle a sword I should be very much at his service. I fancy I could play the part of a riding- or fencing-master indifferent well."

"What pleasanter than a town, indeed!" replied Cicely, with a gay little toss of her head. "Why, the sweet fresh country. I have seen your London. I never wish to see again ten houses standing together. No, no; listen to me, George. Let us keep to green country lanes and wander from village to village. Country people are always kind to wayfarers who speak them fairly and do no mischief. And I will sing for them. I know a store of French ditties I learned from my father, who loved the tongue and spoke it as easily as he did English. Listen, would not this please them and earn our welcome?"

She glanced round to be sure that no one was within earshot. The deck at hand was quite deserted. So she began to sing to me in the softest tones of her rich, sweet voice a gay little *chanson* in which Colin reproaches Jeanette and flings off her chains only to accept them again and bind them faster about him when she throws him a crumb of hope.

She cast back her hood to give herself play and ren-

dered the little ditty with the prettiest archness, Colin's despair, Jeanette's coquetry, her final relenting, and Colin's renewed ardour. She did it to perfection in a tiny thread of voice, exquisitely delicate.

"There!" she said as she finished, a lovely colour, partly of earnestness, partly of a charming confusion, filling her cheeks with a dazzling bloom.

Before I could speak we were startled by a laugh, a dry, chuckling laugh. It was above our heads, and we glanced up. A window in the deck-house, a window which we had not perceived, had been thrust softly open and a man was leaning through it, head and shoulders.

For a moment I stared at the leering face in sheer wonder, then I knew it and ground my teeth. There was no mistaking that seamed, horrible visage, the brutal jowl, the huge tongue thrust in derision between the loose, baggy lips. It was my Lord Viscount Damerel. This, then, was the lord, our fellow-passenger. More, he knew us both. I had made myself too respectable. I had cast away my incognito. Cicely recognised him at once. Who that had seen that satyr-like visage ever forgot it? And she had reason above all. For a moment she stared up at him, her face blanched of all colour, her great dark eyes opened widely. Then she flung her hood over her face with a swift motion and stepped nearer to me. He laughed again.

"So, Mr. Ferrers," said he, in his thick, purring voice, "we meet once more. And in your company my

beauty of the ditch. By all that's wonderful I can scarce believe it. So that was why you made such desperate play for her yonder night. Lord, Lord, what a queer little world it is, and how one runs up against people."

Again he gave his malicious, mirthless chuckle, then went on: "Sweet little singing bird, you shall carol for me yet. And for a reward I will take thee in the coach to see yon tall bully's head blackening on London Bridge or above Temple Bar."

Instinctively my hand flew to my sword hilt. His head shot back, the window was drawn swiftly to by a cord, and all was quiet again. But what a change! What an ending to the merry song! The shore of France was many a mile away yet and Viscount Damerel was here and all-powerful for mischief.

I looked at Cicely. The colour was slowly coming back to her face.

"What shall we do?" she asked.

"Nothing," I replied. "What can we do, dearest? 'Tis the worst of a ship. No prison in the world is like it."

At this moment we were hailed by one of the seamen with the news that breakfast was spread in the cabin.

"Come," said I, "we'll go to breakfast. Whatever's to be done will be done the better for meat and drink." And to breakfast we went.

The meal was nearly over when there was a bustle on

the stairs which led to the cabin. I suspected that it concerned me as nearly as anyone, and I loosened my sword in its sheath and prepared to keep folk at a distance if they threatened my freedom. A group of four entered, Viscount Damerel—his left shoulder still in bandages and his coat huddled over it—two of his men, and the captain of the ship. The men were armed with sword and pistol, and the captain had buckled his hanger about him. There was an outcry of wonder among the passengers to see this armed force enter the cabin, and I stood up in my place.

"That's the man," said the Viscount, pointing to me with his sword. "He is guilty of treason, of aiding and abetting Monmouth's rebels. There are warrants out against him, and a price is set on his head. The King will be especially pleased with his capture, for the rogue was but lately one of his Majesty's officers, and to make an example of him will be useful beyond common."

The captain scratched his whiskers and eyed me uneasily. It was plain he did not like his task. Anyone with half an eye could see that.

"What is your name and condition?" he asked.

"Have I not paid all you demanded for the passage?" I returned. "I do not see that it is necessary to furnish you with such information."

"Will you deny that you are George Ferrers, late a captain in his Majesty's service?" broke in Viscount Damerel.

"First," said I, "I must be satisfied of your right to question me."

"An ample right," he replied; "I am a magistrate, and here is a ship-captain who will be deeply compromised if it comes to the ear of the Privy Council that he has afforded facilities for a traitor to fly the realm."

The captain winced at this, and the Viscount's cruel eyes fired as he saw this discomfiture. I felt certain that the captain, gruff and surly as he was, relished very little the idea of handing me over to the law. He was a short, stout man with a red face and a stubbly red beard. His face was redder than ever, and he tugged at his beard in evident perplexity.

"Will you yield yourself?" he said to me.

"Certainly not," said I.

"I don't see what I can do, my Lord," he said, turning to Damerel with a face twisted into the queerest expression of discontent. "Here I am in charge of all these passengers, women and what not, and you invite me to set on foot a desperate skirmish with a man who looks able to handle a weaver's beam and is armed with a great sword."

"Well, master captain," replied Damerel scornfully, "you had best do something to save your own skin. I tell you plainly that if you suffer this traitor to escape I will make such report of you to the Privy Council that you shall show your nose in no part of England without being seized and your ship made forfeit."

The captain wriggled again, and it was plain to see that Damerel had him in a cleft stick.

"I am a loyal subject," he said slowly.

"Then prove it," said the Viscount sharply, his fierce eyes beginning to burn and sparkle as he found the captain stubborn on his hands. "Do as I bid you or find yourself denounced as a traitor."

"Good people all," began the captain, "avoid yonder man's presence and come from this cabin. You," he said to me, "will stay here, and I bid you not to advance to this door on your peril."

He drew his hanger and flourished it as if to give point to his remarks and prove his firmness in dealing with a rebel. The women and one or two men passengers seated at the table made haste to obey the captain's orders, and all of them, save one, tumbled through the doorway and vanished. The exception was a cherry-checked lass of nineteen or twenty. Short as their acquaintance had been, she had taken a great fancy to Cicely, and now she stayed beside her, murmuring words of sympathy. "Come, Jenny," said the captain, "come this instant," and Jenny was forced to go.

Damerel's men covered me with their pistols steadily, but I did not move from my place. I sat down again, and Cicely sat close beside me and held my hand.

"This room is your prison," said the captain, still with as unwilling an air as ever a man bore, "and if you

attempt to break it you will do so at the risk of your life."

With a wary eye on me all four filed out of the cabin, and the heavy door was clapped to and bolts shot on the farther side.

CHAPTER XX

THE KING'S OFFICER

We drew a long breath and looked at each other. Cicely kissed me with trembling lips and I smiled.

"Cheer up, dearest," I said. "For the life of me I cannot see what they will do with me. They are not likely to turn back now, and when we reach Calais, mayhap we'll get ashore in spite of them yet."

I looked about the cabin and saw there was but the one door. We heard steps pacing up and down the passage. They had set a guard.

We crossed over to the cabin windows and looked out. By the appearance of the distant land the ship was keeping her original course straight out to sea.

"You see," said I, "they are holding to their proper course. There's more fright than hurt at present."

"What a dreadful place is a ship!" said Cicely, her bright eyes turning swiftly in every direction. "Were we free of this room there is nowhere to turn."

"Nowhere," said I.

Suddenly a soft whistle came from the door, then a hoarse whisper. "What cheer?" it said. I went quietly towards the door and found there was a hole in it where a knot in the wood had come out. "Brother," came the voice again, "it's me, Jack Horne. I'm on

guard here with a boarding-pike to keep you in. But with no good will, mind that. This is a Protestant ship, brother, true blue all through. But this lord will settle all our hashes if we don't lookout." Jack broke off abruptly, and I heard his feet begin to beat their steady tramp up and down, and I shot back from the door and told Cicely what I had heard.

"Friends—we have friends on the ship," said she. "Oh, George, may we not hope? Will they not give us a chance?"

"It looks a great deal better for us," said I. "So that was why the captain was so glum and had to be driven to his task. He himself is at heart no friend to the King."

Jack Horne's whisper began again, and I slipped down to the door.

"One of his men just came to take a peep and see how things were going on," reported Jack. "I had to step up and down a bit. But they can't take me unawares. I'm in the dark, they're in the light, and I keep a bright lookout. Brother, it ain't using ye kindly, but don't take offence."

"I do not, indeed," said I. "You can do nothing else or you are lost."

"There ye are," said Jack Horne, "an' that's Gospel truth. We must look sharp on ye now to get a chance of serving ye. I was afeard at first that great lord would demand the ship should put back to land ye.

I don't know what's in the wind now, but keeping right on our voyage seems to me bound to give ye a chance somewhere."

"That is what we have been thinking," I replied.

Jack Horne withdrew suddenly from the knot-hole and I went back to the cabin window where Cicely was seated. At least a couple of hours passed before he hailed us again with his hoarse "What cheer?" During this time the *Lucky Venture* slowed and slowed until she scarcely moved on the face of the water. The day brightened and brightened into one of those calm, windless days of autumn when sea and land sleep in a dreamy yellow haze.

At Jack Horne's first whisper I was back at the door, eager to hear how things stood.

"I've had a mate on the watch," he said, "one of his men, so I had to keep quiet. Yon lord has set himself on the poop with the captain's spy-glass an' he's looking all ways as if he expected something to turn up." Here Jack broke off abruptly, and though I waited near the door several minutes again I heard no more.

So time wore on till it was the middle of the afternoon, and then looking from the cabin windows, we saw the sea rippled by a steady breeze which sprang up suddenly, and the *Lucky Venture* began to lurch and creak over the waves again. An hour later we were startled by the loud report of a cannon fired on deck. In a few moments a second roar followed, then a third.

"What can they be firing at?" I said. "Surely the ship is in no distress in fine weather and on a quiet day such as this."

"Hist!" came Jack Horne's whisper, and I flew to attend it. "Brother, this lord's a very cunning fellow, and things are worse than ye think. Did ye hear the signal-gun?"

"Yes," said I. "Why was it fired?"

The seaman hesitated a moment. "I must tell ye," he said. "It would be cruel to let it come on ye a sudden surprise. Brother, we're rising a King's ship as fast as can be. She's hull over horizon already. And the signal was to call her alongside. The mate was in charge, for the captain had the last watch, and this lord made him do it. As far as that goes, the captain himself durstn't say no, for we're in a tight place, brother, there's no denying it. Ye'll see her on the weather-beam, I daresay, through the cabin windows."

"What is it, oh, what is it?" asked Cicely.

"That," said I, and pointed.

The *Lucky Venture* had turned a little in her course, and the movement brought into view a tall ship coming down upon us under a swelling cloud of canvas.

"How beautiful it looks!" said Cicely. "But what has it to do with us?"

I hesitated even as Jack Horne had done. But her clear, brave eye was fixed full on mine, and she made a little beckoning gesture with her hand as if bidding me tell all and not be afraid.

"It is a man-of-war," said I, "a King's ship." She saw at once what it meant.

"And the cannon was fired to call it hither?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"What will they do?"

"It will be a surer prison than this," I returned, "and a swift passage back."

"Oh, for dry land!" she cried. "What a horrible, horrible prison is this waste of waters! We are held here helpless while that ship sails steadily upon us. Is there nothing we can do?"

There seemed nothing for it. To burst from the present place of confinement would be merely to enlarge the dungeon, and to what end? Overwhelming force was near at hand, and neither flight nor fight was possible. Nearer and nearer came the great ship, then, as if by magic, her sails seemed to vanish, so swiftly were they taken in, and at the same moment we saw a boat lowered from her side. At the instant it touched the water the oars sprang out and were dipped in the sea, and the boat shot from wave to wave towards the *Lucky Venture*.

Cicely turned her shining eyes on mine and drew a deep breath. "They shall not separate us," she said.

"Hist!"

We looked round sharply. The sound had not come from the door, but from the other end of the cabin. In the farther corner we saw a face, a red face, looking at

us through a hole in the floor. We knew it at once. It was that of the captain of the *Lucky Venture*. He beckoned us with his finger, and we went quickly and quietly to him. It was a trap-door in the floor. I lifted it higher, and we saw a rough ladder leading down to the darkness below. The captain stepped away, and there was no need to prompt Cicely. She gathered her skirts together and was down in a flash. I stepped after her, letting the trap descend very slowly and carefully. It fell back into its place without the slightest sound. As soon as it was down a yellow gleam shone out in the darkness. The light widened, and I saw the captain withdrawing the slide of a dark lantern. I looked round and saw we were in the hold of the vessel, a dark, confused space of dusky corners, here piled with goods till the bales and boxes touched the roof, there a narrow gangway left by which the sailors could make their way hither and thither. Beside the captain stood the fresh, pleasant lass who had shown her sympathy with Cicely.

"I don't know what makes me do it," grumbled the captain. "It would be a lot less danger and trouble to me to let yon boat's crew carry ye off."

"Now, father," said the young woman, "you know very well you couldn't do any such thing. You'd never know an easy moment again."

"I s'pose that's it," said the captain.

"You mustn't take any notice of what he says," went on the young woman, turning to us. "He's got a good

heart, has father. And as for letting those men take you because you're in trouble like this, he'd never dream of it. Why, when he was a young man he was one of Oliver Cromwell's best soldiers. He helped him to win at many a fight, Dunbar and Worcester and many a place."

She had taken the lantern, and the light fell on the captain's face. All his bluff, gruff authority was wiped from it, and, as far as a stout, short, elderly ship-captain can do so, he simpered. The martinet on deck before whom Jack Horne and his comrades fled like so many rabbits before a terrier was but clay in the hands of this clever, red-cheeked daughter. He clutched at his dignity again.

"Be quiet, Jenny," he commanded. "Your tongue runs too fast, and time is running, too. I must be on deck to meet yonder boat. You," he continued to Cicely, "must go with my daughter. The women are ready and eager to hide you. Among them you will be perfectly safe, more by token as it is your husband who is sought. Him I'll put in a safe corner down here."

"I would rather stay with him," said Cicely.

"You can't, and that's the end of it," replied the captain. "I've only one place to stow him, and there's bare room enough for him there."

We heard a faint, hollow rapping somewhere above.

"That's for me," said the captain. "Quick's the word. Come this way."

There was no time for delay. We parted. Cicely went

away with the captain's daughter and I followed him deeper into the hold. He gave a low whistle and another lantern was opened.

"Here he is, Tom," whispered the captain, and turned, and hurried away for the deck.

"This way, mate," called Tom, and I went to him. It was one of the crew standing beside a huge box from which the contents had been removed.

"In with you," said Tom. "It'll cramp you a bit, but ye shouldn't be so great. An ordinary man could roll about in it."

I stepped in and lay down. My first thought was of air, but I saw three or four auger-holes drilled in the side at the level of my face and was satisfied. Tom clapped down the lid and I heard keys turn in padlocks. Then bump, bump, heavy bags were pitched on top of the chest and one or two placed in front, but not before the air-holes.

"There ye are, mate," said Tom. "All snug and looks as innocent as may be. Lie still, and I'll be down first chance and let ye out again."

I thanked him, and the queer, hollow, muffled sound of my own voice surprised me. He went away, his bare feet making no sound, and I saw him pass the holes, and with him went the light. I was now left in an utter blackness. I lifted my hand and felt for the holes, for the box seemed solid about me. Of breadth and depth there was ample, but I was a little longer than the chest and had to draw up my knees. A small bag had been

left to serve as a pillow, and I laid my head on it and consigned myself to wait patiently for the return of friends.

The box was set against the side of the ship, and the roar and dash and rush of the waves were at my ear. I was now well below the water-line, and the imagination of the green depths below and around filled my mind as the swirl of the waters filled my ear.

It was twenty minutes later, so I was told afterwards —it seemed to me years—when I heard the sound of feet in the farther part of the hold. I drew a long breath and lay as still as a mouse. I felt certain it was not Tom to release me, he was barefooted. It was the heavy clamp of shoes ringing on the hollow planks. Then a faint gleam came into the darkness. It broadened and I saw things once more, only the boards of the deck and the sides of the bags which flanked my peep-holes, but they looked strange and new after the solid darkness.

Who were the people coming? I knew at the next moment.

"This is the sort of place," cried Damerel. "He is hidden here for a hundred guineas. Now, sir, set your men to turning this out."

"You do not proffer me the most agreeable task, my Lord," replied a cool, quiet voice.

"I proffer you your duty," cried the Viscount in a loud, overbearing tone. "And if you do not see fit to do it, I shall seek an instant interview with your cap-

tain, my friend Mr. Bolitho. And further, Mr. Lieutenant, I have also some influence at home, and it will not be to your interest that I should mention your name as lax in serving the King."

"I do not need to be told my duty by you, my Lord," returned the voice of the lieutenant drily. "If I take the man I shall carry him to my captain, who will decide what is to be done."

He gave two or three brisk orders, and I heard them start an instant rummage among the goods which filled the hold. Casks rattled and banged as they were turned about to see if I was hidden behind, bags and bales bumped heavily as they were flung aside to expose hidden nooks, and there I lay unable to lift a finger to help myself, and I heard this fury of search work steadily nearer and nearer to me. The hold was bright with the shine of three or four lanterns in the hands of the searchers, and I lay peeping through my air-holes like a mouse in my cage-trap, reduced to a pitch of helplessness such as made me rage inwardly.

Footsteps drew nearer, and presently I saw feet pause opposite me. Feet, I say, for higher than the ankles of those moving about I could not see. Then came a dragging noise right at my ear. Someone was pulling aside one of the bags heaped on the lid of the chest. Next a smart rap rattled above my head.

"Here's a box that would hold him, big as he is," said Viscount Damerel. "I'll have the lid of this up, and that instantly."

"It is padlocked," said the naval officer. "Have you the keys, captain?"

"I haven't," replied the captain. "It doesn't belong to the ship. It is consigned to a gentleman at Paris."

"I hope he'll excuse us smashing his padlocks," said the Viscount. "Fellow, fetch a heavy hammer here and burst this box."

I wished at that moment with all my heart I had never entered the unlucky chest. I might have had a fight for it. I could, at any rate, have been seized like a gentleman, but now I must be unkennelled like a fox who has taken to an earth with one hole. It was very easy to imagine Damerel's insolent delight when the lifting lid disclosed me, but I was resolved to give them as great a surprise as lay in my power, and so I drew myself together ready to burst through them when the padlocks were broken.

"Quick! Curse you, quick!" roared the Viscount. "Why do you delay with that hammer?"

A man shuffled up on bare feet, crying as he came, "Shall I knock off the padlocks, your honour?"

"Do, good fellow," said the naval officer.

The heavy hammer came down with a thunderous bang upon the lid above my head. The noise in the tiny confined space was an actual pain. It stifled my brain through and through. Blow after blow was delivered. I put up my hand cautiously to feel if the lid moved. It was as firm as ever. All the while a gen-

eral rummaging was being carried forward by the other seekers.

Suddenly there was a scream of pain and a heavy body fell on the box just above my head. There was a babel of outcries, above which I heard the officers' voices demanding what was the matter.

"Why, sir," cried a man, "here is clumsy sailor let fall a great piece of wood, and struck my lord on his shoulder, fair on his green wound. He's fainted."

"Ay, ay; so he has." The voice of the naval officer sounded as if he was bending over the body on the box.

"'Tis one of the spare spars," said Jack Horne. "We'd stowed them here, and, d'ye see, it slipped from Tom's hand as he moved it to peep behind."

"Let my lord Viscount's men carry him up to the air," commanded the officer. "He will never revive in this foul hold."

There was a shuffle of feet as Damerel was borne away, and in another moment the hammer came down with a bang on the box.

"You can lay that hammer aside," said the naval officer; "there is no need for you to dent the iron band of this chest further. You have not struck any nearer to the padlock than three inches yet."

"Why, your honour——" cried a voice which I knew again as Jack Horne's.

"That will do, my man," said the officer, interrupting him. "You must not answer me back. Put the hammer down and roll out yonder row of barrels."

I heard the hammer flung down, and then I laid my head again on the bag, for my neck ached with the strain of holding it up. What did this mean? Was the attack on the chest given over? My eyes were turned now to the air-holes and suddenly the tip of a sword blade came into view. A lantern had been set down so that its light fell between the bags straight into the holes, and the point of the sword was thrust an inch or so into one hole after another, and then a little of the sawdust which lay near them was scraped together. This sawdust was plainly fresh and new. It had fallen from the auger as it was drawn out after boring the holes and, in the hurry, Tom had forgotten to gather it up. The sword was the officer's, and I knew now for a certainty he must suspect my presence in the chest. I waited with a quickly-beating heart. I heard a slight creak and saw two legs leisurely extended. He had sat down to rest himself on my hiding-place. In a moment he laughed. My heart was easy at a bound. It was a low, frank, pleasant laugh. He knew, and meant to do nothing. So I read it, and I was to find I was not wrong.

For ten minutes or so again there was a mighty rumble of search, then the officer got up from his seat. I heard him blow a soft call on a whistle, and there was perfect silence.

"That will do, my men," said he quietly. "You may put things back in their places."

He went away, and I breathed a blessing after him.

He had saved my neck. There was a hasty setting to rights, then men and lights moved off, and the inky and now thrice-blessed blackness settled down once more.

It was an hour again before Tom turned up with a lantern. He tossed the bags aside, and click, click, went the two padlocks. Then he flung back the lid, and I sat up and drew a long breath.

"Pretty close quarters, mate?" said Tom.

"Did they find anything about my wife?" I asked.

"They never turned a thought her way as far as I can see," replied Tom. "They were keen set on you, though. Yon lord was blazing to take ye."

"Yes," said I, "he has private reasons for owing me a grudge."

I got out of the chest and stretched myself mightily.

"Have the sailors gone?" I asked.

"Yes," said he, "and the ship's made sail too."

"What brought them searching the hold?" said I.

"All the doing of that lord," replied Tom. "There was a window wide open in the cabin where you'd been, and the captain he was of opinion as what you and your wife had seen it was a desperate case and had thrown yourselves into the sea, but nothing would satisfy the lord but a search. And a search it was, and a close one, too, through the ship, except for one cabin. The women were in that, and the captain turned them aside there."

"And what now?" I asked. "May I go up?"

"No, mate," replied Tom. "That would never do. You must stop here till it's safer. Him and his people they're all about the ship. I've come down to let ye out and leave this lantern for company."

He set the lantern beside me and slipped away, his naked feet moving noiselessly over the planks. I heard a hatch softly creak into place after him, and I was alone again in the depths of the ship. But I had a light now, and a wonderful companion it was. I sat down on my ark of refuge, stretched out my legs as my benefactor, Mr. Lieutenant, had done, and waited with complete patience for the next move in my friend's game.

CHAPTER XXI

WE LEAVE THE "LUCKY VENTURE"

A LONG interval passed and then Jack Horne appeared with food. He told me all was going well as far as cheating the law was concerned. The *Lucky Venture,* to be sure, for all her pitching and tossing, was making but little headway, since the wind had veered about and was dead against her. He stayed but for a moment to set down his store of victuals and pass the news.

I was hungry and made a hearty meal, taking plenty of time over it. And plenty of time I had, for I was beginning to think I must have been forgotten again when I heard the creak of boots and saw the captain come into the circle of the lamplight. I hastened to thank him for what he had done, but he cut my thanks short.

"Bound to do it," he growled. "We're all good Protestants here. And that lord, he's a rank Papist. We'd do anything to chouse him out of a catch. Now listen to me. I must get you and your wife out of this ship. It's too small to hide you except at a pinch, and a pinch it's been to-day."

"It was a pretty close shave once," I remarked.

"Yes, yes," nodded the captain. "If Tom had hit the padlocks as he was bidden you'd be miles away in

yonder man-o'-war by now. Well, then, I'm going to put the two of you in a boat with Jack Horne to row ye. The sea's quiet and ye'll easily make the land."

"What land?" said I.

"Why, that's it," returned the captain, scratching his chin uneasily. "It'll have to be somewhere on the Kentish coast. I wish I could do better for ye, but I can't."

"Are we no nearer to France than that?" I asked, for I had no fancy for England at present.

"No," he answered, "we're not. What with the calm and now this contrary wind we're making no headway in the world."

"Could we not reach the French shore in this boat?" I asked.

"Impossible," he replied. "'Tis but a little one that I can spare ye, and it would be madness to attempt the Straits in it."

I sighed in perplexity. "I would lie in any corner," I said, "as close as you please if only we could be landed on the other shore."

"I don't see my way to it," returned the captain doggedly. "Yon folk are watching everything as a cat watches cream. I'm sure they suspect the ship is not clear of ye. And if the least thing comes to light, I'm a lost man if ever I run my ship into the Thames again. And where else am I to go? My living's at stake."

"I know that very well," I replied, "and I am greatly indebted to you for what has happened already. There

is clearly nothing else for it. We must go ashore again and do what we can for ourselves."

"I'll tell you when I'm ready for you," went on the captain. "Will ye have more to eat?"

"Thank you," said I, "I didn't finish all that Tom brought. There's plenty to serve for a meal again."

He went away, and I munched my provender and thought none too joyfully of the bad luck which flung us back on our mother-land, like enough in this case to prove a step-mother to us.

Some time passed again, and the seaman named Tom came to call me. He led me to the farther end of the hold, where a couple of planks had been removed from a bulkhead. I squeezed through the gap and found myself in the forecastle. It was empty, and the light of the swinging lamp striking up the stairs which led to the deck fell on the red face of the captain watching for me. He beckoned me and I went up. Ah, the sweetness and freshness of the night air after the rank closeness of the hold! I filled my lungs again and again in sheer delight of tasting its cold purity. It was clear moonlight. I looked about the deck. It was empty. The ship lay as silent as if all in her slept quietly save we who stood on the forecastle.

Tom closed the hatch which led below and disappeared towards the stern. The sails had been taken in and the ship barely moved.

"Here's the boat," said the captain, and I looked over the side and saw a small boat riding at the end of a

rope. "Ye must get in and be off from this end," he said. "It's the least open to notice. The state-room windows look astern."

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Here comes Jack now," said the captain as a barefooted seaman came silently towards us.

"I fear this will lay you open to suspicion," I said; "a boat and a man gone."

"I scarce think so," replied the captain. "Only this lord and his people are prying after you. They know too little of the gear to miss the boat, and too little of the crew to miss the man."

Jack came up to the forecastle and busied himself with putting a short rope-ladder into position and carrying a jar of water and some food into the boat.

Suddenly the click of heels on the deck rang out clear and sharp in the moonlit silence. The captain looked up in surprise. What untoward thing was this that some passenger should be abroad? He crept swiftly to see who it was, but returned more swiftly still.

"Down here with you!" he whispered shrilly. "'Tis that lord, as I'm a living sinner."

I dropped into hiding behind a pile of cordage and Jack Horne pulled the boat close into the shadow under the ship's counter.

"Who would have thought of him turning out at this time to ramble about by night?" whispered the captain.

"'Tis his way. He loves the darkness better than the light," I replied.

The captain moved forward to watch him, and upon the instant I remembered Cicely had to come the length of the ship to join me. Suppose this evil night-bird recognised her? Her face I knew she would muffle, but her walk might easily betray her. No other woman in the ship could move with her free, graceful carriage. I left my refuge and crept, under shelter of the bulwarks, after the captain. The latter had come to a stand and was watching Damerel. The Viscount was pacing the deck from side to side, his head bent as if in deep thought. He moved briskly; he seemed easily twice the man by night he was by day. The captain was breathing short and heavily. Upon what a rack of suspense was he stretched! If Damerel chose to walk forward, he might see the rope-ladder and the boat. Where stood the captain then? I reproached myself that I had thought a little hardly of the man for refusing to carry us to France. As long as we were on the ship there was but a plank between him and destruction in more senses than one.

"Ha!" breathed the captain, as if he saw something beyond common. I raised myself a little from the shadow of the bulwark and saw it too. A closely muffled figure, a woman's figure, was coming along the deck. It was Cicely. Damerel was leaning at the moment on the bulwark. He turned to resume his march and his eyes fell on her. He stepped forward to her. She knew him and stopped dead. He flourished his hat with a bow

which was an insult in itself. I do not think he knew her.

His thick voice came plainly to my ears.

"Madam," he said, "you have, I trust, come up to take the pleasant air in the moonlight. Permit your most humble servant the honour of waiting upon you." His tone was as insolent as he could make it.

He believed that no woman on the ship was of a rank to receive the compliments he was paying. He fancied doubtless that he was making a fine fool of her.

I straightened myself and the captain saw me. He waved his hand to me to keep back. His face expressed such terror that I was still for a moment for his sake. Then he pointed, and I checked myself and waited. For Jack Horne, climbing like a cat and going as silently as a shadow, was already in the rigging, and gliding from rope to rope above the Viscount's head. Cicely still stood immovable. She said afterwards that she feared to move, feared to speak, lest he should know her.

Damerel gave another fine flourish of his hat and stepped towards her.

"So coy," he said; "so silent. Let me draw aside this cloak and have the pleasure of seeing my fair companion of the watch."

The captain had made one stride to me and now held me by the arm.

"Wait," he whispered. "Keep still, man, keep still. Give Jack a chance."

Jack saw his chance at the moment. Damerel straightened himself up and was about to replace his hat, when the seaman from above dropped a heavy block upon him. Fair and square the block took the Viscount on top of his skull and felled him to the deck. The dull crack of wood and bone meeting was plain where we stood, and now I ran forward. Cicely flew to meet me and I took her hand.

"Was your face muffled all the time?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "He could not have known me." We hurried up to the forecastle, where the captain was waiting at the ladder.

"Away with ye!" he said. "Haste, haste, and then I must go pick up yonder lord. He lies like a dead man."

"I trust this will bring you into no further mischief," said I.

"Why should it?" he asked with a grim chuckle. "He comes out to ramble, and a block shakes loose aloft and drops on his head just as he's talking nonsense to my daughter who's come up to speak to me. No, no, he can get hold of nothing here. Let me but once see ye clear of the ship and I care for nought."

Jack Horne was already in the boat holding it off the ship's side with an oar. I went down the ladder and landed easily in the stern. Then I prepared to receive Cicely, whom the captain above was helping to gain a footing on the rope rungs. She came down nimbly,

and I took hold of her and lifted her clean into the boat.

"Sit down astarn there," said Jack, seating himself and thrusting out the oars. We both looked up to the captain to give him our last words of thanks; but he had gone, and now the boat moved steadily away from the vessel, the sailor drawing his strokes so that not the faintest splash was to be heard. At the same moment we saw sail made on the ship, and off she glided, sheering away from our course, so that in a few minutes we were far apart.

"Who struck him down?" asked Cicely when we were clear away and speaking was safe.

"There the man sits," I replied, pointing to Jack Horne. "And a neater, cleverer bit of work I never saw in my life."

I told the story, and Jack interrupted by growls and snorts of disdain at the idea of anyone taking notice of such a trifle as that.

"Pooh, brother," he cried. "'Twas nothing at all. Wait till ye've something to thank me for. Don't count that as aught."

"I fancy my lord will count it something," said I. "It was a rare crack I know. We heard it plainly from where we stood."

Jack chuckled and allowed it was enough to keep him quiet till we were safely off.

"Brother," he said, "ye had a stroke of luck in that young officer as come wi' that boat's crew. And ye had

another stroke o' luck, too, in yon lord bein' such a bad-tempered man. Between the two ye just scraped out of it."

"Tell us what happened," said I. "I know you are right about the officer."

"Well," said Jack, pulling a strong, leisurely stroke, "it was like this. When that young fellow first came aboard he didn't seem over and above pleased at finding he'd got a sort of thief-taker's job. An' when my lord began to give him orders about searching the ship, all very high and mighty like, he didn't take everything too pleasant, an' they had a few words. He was a fine, straight, young fellow, too, with as smart and bright an eye in his head as ever I see," said Jack. "So when we came to that very box where you lay and my lord felt queer owing to the stink o' the bilge an' that, an' had to go, the officer left that box alone. And why? Because he knew you were inside. Brother, he was as certain as I was. I saw him with a little smile on his face a-scraping together the sawdust out of the breathing-holes."

"I saw him, too," said I. "I saw him from inside and felt certain he must know the only thing it could mean."

"It pointed him his way as straight as you like," said Jack. "So you see my lord spoilt his own game through his bad temper, and serve him right."

Next I related the adventure as I had seen it, and

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Cicely told her story of how the women had kept her out of everybody's way.

"Let me have an oar," said I. "I know how to row, and it is not fair for you to do all the work."

"It's the same as play to me," replied the honest seaman. However, I took an oar, and we sent the small skiff at a swinging pace over the water. Luckily, the night was fine and the sea quiet. As we went we talked over a landing-point. I had a plan in my head and wished to be set on shore as far westwards as possible, well down the coast of Sussex if possible. Jack was quite willing, but he feared that in so small a boat we could not do it. However, just as the dawn was breaking, we heard voices, and presently drew near a fishing-vessel, the people of which were drawing up their net.

"What cheer, brothers?" called out Jack to the astonished fishermen. "How goes the catch?"

"Badly, very badly," they answered. "Who are you?"

"We have left a vessel which puts into the Thames," he replied, "and are rowing westwards to save ourselves a long land journey."

We pulled alongside and found it was a fishing-boat out from Deal; the crew consisted of an old man and his two sons.

"Are you willing to mend your bad catch by a good bargain?" I said. "I will give you ten guineas to cross the Straits and land us in France."

"No, no," cried the old man, "we will take part in

no such thing. We are as far from the shore as we will go."

"Very well, then," I returned; "will you carry us westwards?"

At first there was some demur, for they did not like the idea of passengers who wished at first to cross to France, but as they were very poor, the money tempted them, and it sounded innocent enough to run along the coast. The wind, too, set fair down the Channel. Past Beachy Head they would not go, and finally they agreed to land us somewhere near it for the sum of six guineas.

We went aboard the little vessel, and the skiff was made fast to it by a rope. The sail was hoisted, and away we went down the Channel before the favouring breeze. Cicely and I seated ourselves aft where the sail broke the wind. Jack Horne entered himself at once as one of the crew and gave the fishermen a hand in everything they did.

"Cicely," said I, "do you know where we are going?"

"No," she said. "But doesn't it seem like a fate that we can't get away from England?"

"It does," I replied, "and I mean to turn the fate to account. I propose that we go straight to Rushmere."

"Where everyone knows us?" said she.

"I do not mean that we should walk down the village street in open daylight," I laughed. "But think for a moment. The search for us in that part of the

country must have died away long ago. At the present moment the only people who know we are in England and who would do us mischief are Kesgrave and his man and that old woman. Do you know I believe that rogue spoke the truth when he assured the parson that they would be their own hue-and-cry." Cicely shivered a little.

"Are you afraid of them?" I asked.

"Afraid of those men? And you here?" she said. "No, not likely. I was thinking of that horrible old woman. She was wickedness itself."

"Well," I went on, "it seems to me that if we go very cautiously and creep into Rushmere by night, and the days close in early now, we can come at Sir Humphrey and Lady Lester very well. And there I look to get our pockets filled with money and off with us again to some safe place abroad."

"I will go anywhere as long as you will take care that no one knows you," said Cicely.

"I think it's safe enough," I said, pressing her hand. "You see, poor as we sit here, we can raise money easily, if we can but come at our own, and I look to Sir Humphrey to give us a hand there. The money we have in purse now is nothing at all to go abroad upon; but it is ample to carry us to friends who will help us to everything we need."

By this time the day had come, and we looked out and saw the Kentish coast low and dim to the north and west of us, curving hook-like to Dungeness. The wind

still held and the fishing-boat ran freely and steadily before it. Now Jack Horne came, bringing the food with which the boat had been stored, and we ate and drank. The captain had made ample provision, and there was plenty for all, and Jack fed the fishermen and put them in the best of humour with us.

About mid-morning the breeze slackened. We had now cleared Dungeness. The sun was bright, the sea blue and sparkling, and here and there white sails flecked the shining plain of waters.

"Look at that large ship spreading every inch of sail to catch the wind," said I, pointing to a vessel coming up astern.

Jack Horne at this moment came astern and joined us.

"Brother," said he, "how far westwards d'ye want to go?"

"As far as Hampshire," I replied.

"Then ye were thinkin' o' road-travel after Beachy Head?"

"I was."

"Sea-travel's easier a good bit."

"It is," said I.

"Well, then," replied Jack, "here's your chance. D'ye see this brig overhauling us. She berths next the *Lucky Venture* in the Pool and runs from London to Southampton. I know her well and they know me."

"Southampton!" I cried. "The very place I should wish for."

"We'll hail her and go on board," said Jack.

"Will it not give rise to suspicion?" I asked.

"Why?" queried Jack. "There's nothing commoner than for folks who live alongshore where no ship calls to come off in a boat and pick her up as she passes. I know. I've been up an' down here scores of times."

"But they'll wonder to see you," I said.

"Brother," said Jack, "sailor-men never tell tales of each other. It'll be all right."

"How about the skiff?" said I.

"'Tis sold," he replied. "These men want one, and the price is settled."

He hailed the fishermen and bid them stand out a little more into the path of the brig. They saw his purpose at once, and the old man came to demur. He had agreed to go as far as Beachy Head and was willing to finish the trip. I understood what he meant and paid him his six guineas on the spot. The rudder was at once altered, and we stood out to sea to lie on the brig's course. She come up shortening sail, as if our wish were understood. Jack hailed them and was recognised. A movable patch of the bulwark was opened and a ladder flung down. The brig was heavily laden and lay low in the water, so that it was a short climb to her deck, and we were soon on board. Sail was made once more, and the brig glided on her course rapidly, leaving the fishermen astern.

"This is a stroke of luck and no mistake," said I, returning to Cicely's side, after settling matters with

the captain of the vessel. "We shall be landed within the easiest journey of home and at a capital place. I know Southampton well enough to find my way about, but I do not think I am known there."

Off and on, the wind held pretty steadily all day, so that the brig made good headway, and was still driving her nose westwards when the misty autumn evening shut down upon the sea. There were several other passengers, and the brig's limited accommodation was somewhat strained by our arrival, but the captain's wife happened to be aboard and she took Cicely under her care, while Jack and I got along very well with shake-downs in the main cabin.

I was afoot again before the dawn and went on deck. Jack was already there, and I saw him among a group of seamen standing near a bright lantern hung amidships.

"Where are we now?" I asked as he came towards me.

"Running up to Southampton with the tide," he answered. "D'ye see yon lights twinkling? They're from houses on the shore."

"And how long to the journey's end?"

"She'll be fast beside the quay an hour after daybreak." He looked round and lowered his voice. "Have ye a safe place to be off to, brother?"

"As safe a place as good friends can make it, Jack," I replied.

"Ay, ay," he said. "I'm right glad to hear it. A

friend in need is a friend indeed. How will ye get there?"

"I must find something for my wife to ride and I shall walk."

"Why, then," said he, "I know the very place for ye to go—Joe Dyott's, behind the 'Jolly Mariner' inn, not sixty yards from the quay. He does a rare trade buyin' an' sellin' horses to travellers."

"The very thing I wished to learn," said I.

One of his acquaintances hailed Jack and he went forward. I looked over the bulwarks and looked eastwards, where a faint, grey streak marked the coming dawn. The light grew and grew until a soft pallor lay over water and land, and I saw the fields once more, and trees and scattered cottages. England still encompassed us.

As the light broadened the ship became astir, for the passengers were eager to set foot on shore. A plentiful breakfast was spread in the cabin, and by the time we were making an end of the meal the sailors were casting their ropes over the posts on the quay.

In the bustle and confusion Cicely and I, accompanied by Jack Horne, slipped away and sought the dealer's yard. Here we found Joe Dyott himself, already busy among his horses, and almost at the first glance I saw an animal to serve our turn. This was a stout, brown pony of about eleven hands, not, to be sure, the handsomest mount for a lady, but with plenty of bone and in capital condition. The dealer de-

manded eight pounds for him, and though this was beyond his worth, there was no time to haggle, and I agreed. For thirty shillings again he furnished us with a side-saddle, bridle, and so forth, and I set to and made the pony ready for the road forthwith.

"What are you going to buy for yourself?" asked Cicely in my ear. I laughed.

"And the journey less than thirty miles," said I. "I shall walk, and you'll find then I could outstrip you easily if I wished on the track we shall follow to-day."

CHAPTER XXII

WE SURPRISE SOME OLD ACQUAINTANCES

When all was ready I swung Cicely up to the saddle, tossed the pack which held our luggage across the pony's back behind her, and led him directly away. Jack Horne came with us to see us started, as he said, and we went quietly through the town, the streets still empty and deserted, and struck the road which led towards the head of Southampton Water. Two miles out of the town Jack Horne turned back. He was returning to London in the brig. We thanked him again and again for what he had done for us, and he wished us luck a score of times. I prevailed upon him to take a few guineas for himself and two or three for Tom, to whom I had had no chance to give anything, so hurried had been our departure from the *Lucky Venture*. After we parted we looked back again and again, and every time he was waving his cap, till at last we turned a bend and saw him no more.

Now we set our faces towards Rushmere in earnest, and I stepped out at a brisk pace, the pony, a nimble, willing creature, ambling easily beside me. The morning was bright and deliciously fresh. The road was good underfoot, the sky was blue overhead. We glanced at each other in sheer pleasure.

"Do we look our parts?" she asked.

"Perfectly, I believe," said I. "I've seen many a small tradesman or respectable citizen taking a short journey in this fashion, himself on foot, his wife mounted. One thing is lacking, perhaps. I ought to have a stout staff. But that is easily remedied at the next plantation of young ashes."

As we went up the quiet country road that golden, autumn morning we laughed, we talked, we sang. We were practically under sentence of death, of course, supposing someone met us who knew us and was willing to earn the reward of the informer. But no one did know us or could know us for many a mile yet, and we meant to be careful in time. We skirted the head of Southampton Water and then made directly for the New Forest. Soon we left travelled ways behind and marched by grassy heath-tracks, the turf underfoot like velvet, or by lonely rides which took us deep among the trees. We made a long stretch of our first march, and it was close upon midday when I called a halt in a sunny hollow of the forest where a clear spring bubbled up and ran away over a bed of silver sand.

I had bought some provisions at a hamlet we passed, and now these were spread on the turf, and we sat down while the pony cropped the grass.

We made a halt of three hours and then went on easily. We were within ten miles of Rushmere, and though we were approaching it through a very thinly inhabited heath and forest country, of which I knew

every inch, yet I was not willing to enter upon the last three or four miles before the dusk had fallen. The sun went down in a sky of clearest amber, and we halted to rest the pony on a wide, lonely common a few miles south of Rushmere. As the dusk thickened we moved on again. The moon would not be up till three hours after sundown, but the starlight was ample for me to track my way by. A couple of hours slow, cautious marching brought us under the wall of Sir Humphrey's park. Cicely sprang down and I stripped the harness from the pony. This and our baggage I thrust under a thicket of brambles. The pony shook itself and began to feed. I patted it approvingly, for it had shown itself a good little beast without trick or vice.

Then we went softly under shadow of the wall towards the park entrance a quarter of a mile away. There was a shine of fire in the lodge window, but the door of the house was closed and all was silent. We went over the foot-stile beside the great iron gate and were in the avenue. But we soon turned aside to the park, and crossed the grass to a private door leading to the gardens. Luckily, it was unlocked, and in we stepped. Now the house was in full sight, a great ebon mass against the starry sky, with lights shining here and there.

"I fancy," said I, "that perhaps the best thing would be for me to go ahead and discover, if I can, how things stand."

"We mustn't make a mistake," said Cicely. "We have our friends to think of as well as ourselves."

"It was in my mind, too," I replied. "Here we are just at the great summer-house. Suppose you stay in it a little while I reconnoitre."

She agreed, and I left her there and went quickly forward. In the front of the house there was no light in any lower window, and I went softly along the terrace towards the wing where I knew the Lesters had their favourite rooms. As I went I thought of that August day when I had seen Cicely and Kesgrave pace up and down this very terrace, and of how she had seemed cold to me. To think that she sat now waiting for me in the summer-house and would be tenderly uneasy if I were long away, seemed mingled fire and sunshine in my heart and gave this autumn dusk a glow that brightest August never knew.

I turned a corner and saw a window red with firelight. I had my hopes at once. I crept nearer and peeped in. My heart leaped joyfully within me. I saw a great, panelled parlour and three figures sitting about a glowing fire of logs. Sir Humphrey sat on one side, his wife on the other, and the Commodore had dragged up an elbow-chair and was seated between them. Candles stood upon the table, but they were unlighted. The leaping flames were ample for the talkers as they chatted cosily in their dancing light.

"All's well," thought I, and turned to fetch Cicely. Then I stopped. It looked very well, but what if there

were other and less convenient guests than the Commodore in the house. I would make certain of that first. Half-a-dozen paces beyond the window was a side-door leading to a gallery upon which the parlour opened. I went stooping under the window, gained the door, and lifted the latch. It was so early in the evening that it was unsecured, and the door opened to my push. There was no light in the gallery and no sound of anyone moving. I slipped across to the parlour, and went straight in, lifting my hand for silence. They turned their heads as I appeared, and for a moment stared at me in an astonishment so complete that the outcry I feared from the Commodore was an impossibility.

"What!" he bellowed at last.

"Hush," I whispered as I came forward. "Yes, it is I, George."

"George, George," murmured Sir Humphrey, while Lady Lester, who was nearest to me, sprang up and took me in her arms.

"My dear lad!" said Sir Humphrey, coming up and seizing my hand. "And is it you, really?"

"Ay, ay, thank God, it is," said the Commodore, waving his hook in his delight. "But quiet's the word," he called out at least ten times as loudly as was necessary; "not a sound, brother. Quiet, sister; ask him no questions yet. We must hide him till your people are abed."

"First of all," said I, "have you any other visit-

ors about the house? Anyone likely to come in here?"

"No, no," said Lady Lester. "No one but ourselves?"

"Well, then," I returned, "with your permission I will fetch my companion, for you must know I am not travelling alone."

"Fetch him in, poor fellow, fetch him in!" cried the Commodore. "There's many a one in your pickle, my lad, hiding about the country yet."

"One of our lost ones come back," said Sir Humphrey, patting my arm and looking at me affectionately; "one of them, at any rate, Heaven be praised!"

"And have you heard nothing, then, of Cicely?" I asked.

"Not a word," said the Commodore, wagging his head. "Poor lass, 'tis a sad case. She was trepanned, I'll swear to that. Trepanned she must have been. To vanish and leave no sign. 'Tis not the first case known, either. But fetch the other poor lad in. Sister'll warm and feed ye like princes. Be sure of that."

"It isn't a man," said I. "It's a lady."

"A lady?" said Sir Humphrey, open-mouthed.

"A lady?" echoed the Commodore and looked uneasily at his companions.

"Yes," said I, "my wife."

"Wife! Married!" You should have heard them pipe out then, and the Commodore clenched his exclamation with a great oath.

"You are married, George?" said Lady Lester in a tone of incredulity and looking earnestly into my face.

"Yes," said I. "I have got married on my travels. But I will fetch her in from the dark and the cold where I left her till I had looked over the ground."

Not a word was said as I left the room, only the Commodore began to make a half-whistling, half-blowing noise, which always betokened that he was somewhat puzzled and not overpleased. I sped swiftly back to the summer-house. Cicely knew my step and ran to meet me.

"All's well," said I. "They are in the oak parlour; we can get in by the side door; you remember?"

"Yes," said she, "I know it well. Who are there?"

"Sir Humphrey, Lady Lester, and the Commodore. And I've left them in a state of wonder beyond speech. I told them I was coming to fetch my wife, but they haven't the least idea who the lady is."

"Oh!" laughed Cicely.

"There'll be an uproar when they see your face," said I, joining in the laugh.

As we passed the window I glanced in. The three in the parlour had not sat down again. They stood looking at each other as if talking and taking counsel, and I saw Sir Humphrey shake his head in a very perturbed fashion. The candles were now lighted. I had left the door slightly ajar and in we went, across to the parlour door and in there. Lady Lester stepped forward, very stately, to receive us. In sheer mischief I

had taken Cicely's hand to introduce her in formal phrase when she snatched it from my grasp, flung back her hood, and sprang towards Lady Lester. Cicely! Cicely! I believe it was more surprising to them to see her than to see me, so completely had she been given over, and their excitement and delight were in proportion. Lady Lester took her to her breast, Sir Humphrey shook her hand again and again, and the Commodore fairly skipped in his joy. Then he proved himself the most wide awake of all by springing across the room and drawing the curtains. I stepped back to the door and slipped a catch so that it could not be opened from without, and we all gathered about the fire.

"It seems impossible," said Sir Humphrey as he kissed Cicely.

"So this is your wife, you rogue, is it?" cried the Commodore, digging his hook into my side. "Nothing would satisfy ye, you young dog, eh, but the prettiest maid in all the west-country. And where in the name of wonder did ye pick her up? Cicely, my lass, I'm ten years younger at sight of ye."

"Cicely come back again? and George? And you're married?" Lady Lester's usual composure was utterly gone, and she was laughing and crying together.

"Tell us your story," cried the Commodore.

"They must have their supper first," said Lady Lester. "From where have you come to-day?"

"From Southampton," I answered.

"From Southampton," she said. "You must be worn out."

She went away at once, and soon returned with a tray of food and wine. We wanted to talk, but our old friends would have us eat and drink first, and we were compelled to do their bidding. Then chairs were drawn up to the fire and we entered on a recital of our adventures. Turn and turn about as the story twisted we spoke, and for an hour or more our hearers listened to us in breathless silence, except when the Commodore became too much wrought up to remain still and fired off volleys of comminations at Damerel, or Kesgrave, or Colin Lovel.

"And now," said Sir Humphrey, breaking into the stream of questions and comments when we had accounted for ourselves up to the moment, "the future?"

"We have been thinking of getting abroad," said I.

"It would be best," he agreed. "England is no place for either of you at present."

"Hast plenty of money?" demanded the Commodore.

"That's the point," said I. "We have scarcely any left."

"God bless me!" cried the Commodore. "Ye must never stand for money. We'll find ye plenty. Why, thou knowest, lad, every stick, stone, and penny of mine will come to thee when I die. And here's brother and sister as ready to help ye as any in this world."

"Ay, ay," said Sir Humphrey.

"You shall have everything you want," added Lady Lester.

We thanked these good friends again and again. How delightful it was to be once more in safe quarters and in safe hands! The shadow of further wanderings lay over us, but for the instant we could bask in the firelight and stretch our weary limbs, sure of the present moment, with no fears to break or disturb it.

"Have you any chatterers about your household, sister?" asked the Commodore.

"I was just thinking of that very thing, Richard," she replied. "Most of the servants are reliable, but I cannot be sure of some of the younger maids. It will not do, I fear, for their presence to be known generally."

"No, no," said Sir Humphrey, "it is best to run no risks. We can stow them away in the east wing beyond our own rooms, Rachel. Practically none of the servants go that way save Deborah, your woman, and my man, Thomas. They may know safely, the rest must be kept in ignorance."

"And how go things at Whitemead?" I asked. "Are old William Quance and the rest all right?"

"William is very well, for I saw him this morning," said Sir Humphrey, "but he is no longer at Whitemead. He refused to stay there under Mr. Rennison, and so did most of your other servants."

"Mr. Rennison!" said I. "And pray who is he? And what is he doing at Whitemead?"

All three looked at me in surprise.

"Have you heard nothing about Whitemead?" asked Lady Lester.

"Not a word," said I.

"Why, confound the greedy rogues, it's filched from you, lad!" cried the Commodore. "You being in the pickle you were, it was declared that your estate was forfeited, and this fellow Rennison, having claims in some fashion on the King, was paid off by a grant of Whitemead."

"Whitemead gone?" I murmured, for it was a wrench. I cannot deny that it was a wrench.

"Gone for the moment, George," said Sir Humphrey quietly, "but I think we shall get it back. I fancy Mr. Rennison will be willing to sell, and that at a price far below its value."

"Doesn't he like the old place?" I asked.

"'Tisn't that," chuckled the Commodore, "but some desperate cad or other fired at him one night as he rode home from Romsey in the moonlight, and the ball went through his hat. He was off to London next day, and I'll warrant he'll be glad to get his bargain off his hands and see cash instead. Brother's dealing with him now, and we'll raise the money among us, never fear."

"You heap kindness on kindness," I began, but the Commodore interrupted me with a snort.

"Hark at the lad!" he cried. "As if we'd anybody else to see after, and he and Cicely running together, too."

"Ay," said I. "Great Barrow? How there?"

"No better than you," said Lady Lester. "But to whom it has gone or what is being done we don't know yet."

Cicely looked round at us from the chair where she sat and smiled.

"I give you my word," she said, "I have been so uneasy at what might happen to ourselves if we were caught that I trouble but little about house and land. Yet, to be sure, it's a shame for them to take Great Barrow."

"The whole affair is shameful, my child," said Lady Lester. "After the way they murdered poor Dame Lisle—and murder is the only word for that—no one can wonder at what happens. We have heard that the maids of honour have been as bold as any in begging for the fines and forfeits laid upon suspected people and places."

"Certainly the country has come to a desperate pass," agreed Sir Humphrey, "and this fashion of quelling the rebellion must tell bitterly in the end against the King."

CHAPTER XXIII

WE MAKE A FRESH START

It was on a Thursday evening that we arrived at Rushmere, and we lay snugly concealed in the ample shelter of the east wing until the next Thursday. It was quiet, but we were in no humour to grumble at that; as well expect the hunted stag to repine in the sweet shady covert where he lies secure from the hounds.

While we rested and spent a few halcyon days our friends were busy for us. The Commodore's man, Peter Catlin, as true blue an old salt as his master, was despatched to a village in the southern reach of Southampton Water to arrange that a lugger should be ready for us on Thursday night, when the tide would serve about eleven o'clock.

On the Tuesday evening, some two hours after dark, the Commodore rode up to Rushmere, very drunk, and with a large bag of gold in his pocket. It had been his errand that day to obtain money in Romsey, and he had not neglected his opportunities at the market-dinner. Still, so seasoned a vessel was he that the utmost strong liquor could do was to fluster him slightly; his seat and his speech it never affected.

"Here's your money," said he, jingling the bag down on the table of the oak parlour, where Sir Humphrey and I were sitting, "and it's time for you to go."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Who d'ye suppose I saw to-day?" he said, wagging his head portentously. "My Lord Kesgrave, if you please, walking about with as smooth a face as the honestest man in the fair."

"Kesgrave!" said I, and we looked at each other.

"That's the man," replied the Commodore, "and I told him my mind as plain as ye like. For he came up to me offering to shake my hand, but I would have none of him. 'My Lord Kesgrave,' says I, 'you're a scurvy rogue, a damned scurvy rogue,' and with that I put my hand in my pocket."

"And when was it you met him?" I asked.

"About half an hour before I started home," replied the Commodore. It was the answer I expected.

"And did you explain why you set such names on him?" I asked bitterly.

"George!" cried the Commodore, cocking an eye of drunken wisdom on me, "as if I should be such a fool as that!"

"How did he take your attack, Richard?" asked Sir Humphrey.

"Just laughed and went his way," replied his brother-in-law.

"I don't like the look of this," I remarked to Sir Humphrey, as the Commodore settled himself in a chair and began to nod in the warmth of the room.

"Nor I, my boy," he returned. "But, thank Heaven, you are off soon."

He drew the bag of money towards him and began to tell it. When he had done so we returned to our conversation on the future arrangements of Cicely and myself, but in a few minutes we were interrupted in an odd fashion, a fashion which might easily have proved very dangerous for us all. Of a sudden we heard the handle turned, the door was opened a little, and a voice called out, "Sir Humphrey, are you here?"

I knew it at once, and made but one spring from my chair to the refuge of the thick window curtains. Luckily, I was sitting on that side of the room and was under cover in a hand's turn. I flung them together before me, and then stood rigidly still. The curtains did not close by the width of a tiny slit, through which I could look into the room. They were still shaking violently when Squire Hampton came into sight round the door. He had heard the scrape of my chair, I felt certain. His cunning ferrety eye came my way before he spoke to Sir Humphrey.

"I was just riding home from Romsey," he said, "and it occurred to me to call and ask for the loan of your copy of the paper from London about the new Revenue taxes. I found the front door ajar, so fastened my horse and came direct here, as I knew it was your habit to sit in this parlour of an evening."

"Take a chair, Mr. Hampton," said Sir Humphrey, "and be seated for a moment. I will fetch the paper from my justice room."

Mr. Hampton murmured his thanks and apologies

for the intrusion, and away went Sir Humphrey. The Commodore continued to nod by the fire. Scarcely had Sir Humphrey's creaking step ceased to sound along the passage than, to my great uneasiness, I saw that Squire Hampton was about to leave his chair. He looked with the utmost caution at his nodding companion; he half raised his body and fixed his curious eye on my retreat. It was evident he felt certain someone was concealed there, and I knew it would be utterly beyond his self-control to refrain from prying into a mystery.

Then he stood up and began to cross the room with slow, stealthy steps. I clenched my fist and prepared to strike him from the shelter of the curtains, when of a sudden the Commodore leapt to his feet, made two strides up to him, and caught him by the collar with the hook which served my kinsman as a hand. Squire Hampton wriggled and attempted to spring aside, but the hook was fast in his cravat and held him as tightly as ever hook held trout. Then the Commodore's open hand, hard as a slab of oak, took him with a resounding cuff along the side of the head and rolled him over and over towards the door, the cravat tearing away and a long shred of it fluttering on the hook like a streamer of victory.

The Squire called out in his pain like a boy not yet old enough or man enough to set his teeth and take his gruel without yelping, and tried to scramble to his feet. But while he was yet on hands and knees half-way up

the Commodore dealt him a hearty kick with his heavy riding-boot, and shot him sprawling at the feet of Sir Humphrey, who now ran in. All the time, with a cunning I had not thought in him, the Commodore was raving and tearing about some insult which Squire Hampton was supposed to have offered him at the market-dinner and which he was now avenging.

Sir Humphrey hastened to place himself between them, and laid a restraining hand on his brother-in-law. Mr. Hampton made another attempt to rise, and got to his feet successfully this time. On his assailant making another burst, he stayed neither for paper nor remonstrance nor aught else, but made one jump for the door and bolted for the outside and the safety of the saddle. Then the Commodore laughed loudly and waved his hook in triumph, the tatter of cravat tossing like a pennon in the wind.

"Brother, brother, what new madness is this?" cried the baronet.

"Madness, Humphrey! there's more matter than madness here, I'll let ye to know," cried the victor. "Yon rogue was about to draw the cover and beat Master George out when I caught him and hauled him up short."

"It is quite true, sir," said I, coming forward. "Hampton was half-way towards me when the Commodore checked his advance with a vengeance."

"Ay, ay!" roared the old gentleman. "I hate the

knave like poison. It was better than meat and drink to give him yon clout and kick."

"Well, brother, pray Heaven he be not rendered too suspicious by this awkwardness," said Sir Humphrey. "And now as to the vessel in which they fly. Is all settled plainly so that no mistake can be made?"

"As straight and as simple as can be," replied the Commodore.—"Thou knowest thy way, lad, from here to Hythe?"

"Perfectly well," said I.

"Ay, ay," he rejoined. "Well, then, Peter Catlin himself will be waiting for ye to see ye on board and bring back word at once to us. Take time so that ye draw towards Hythe between ten and eleven of the clock. Peter will lie beside the road, and whoever comes he will advance towards them whistling 'The Leather Bottle.' If it be strangers, he will pass them with a good-night; but you, hearing the tune, will speak to him, and he will know ye and lead ye straight to the spot where the lugger lies."

On the Thursday evening, as soon as the dusk was deep enough, we set out on our travels again, this time provisioned royally with money to carry us whither we were bound. We parted from Sir Humphrey and Lady Lester and the Commodore in the park, then walked a mile and a half into the depths of the chase, where Thomas, Sir Humphrey's man, was awaiting us with the pony I had bought at Southampton. He had caught it on the day after our arrival and safely stabled it

against our departure. It seemed to be best to march exactly as we did before, with nothing about us which would do mischief to a third person should we be unlucky enough to come to grief. Our baggage was still as slender as ever, for we meant to purchase abroad what we required. Three minutes after we reached the copse where Thomas stood with the pony we were on our road, and he was hurrying back to the Hall. The night was clear and pleasant; there was no moon, but the stars shone steady and serene. I took the rein and stepped out swiftly, and the pony ambled beside me. For three hours we travelled thus through the dewy, starlit silence; sometimes we talked together in soft tones, sometimes we kept silent for long stretches, a silence as companionable as speech. Then as we passed the window of a wayside cottage, through whose curtain shot a chink of light, I paused to look at my watch.

"Ten o'clock," said I. "We are timing ourselves to a moment."

"How much farther have we to go?" asked Cicely.

"We ought to be there," I replied, "in an hour, or a little more."

The hour passed and we were now less than a mile from Hythe. We slackened our pace and advanced at an easy walk. We went half a mile farther, then checked ourselves and waited, for a man was coming towards us whistling cheerily. It was the air agreed upon, and I whistled a bar or two in answer. He came

up and turned on us a tiny slit of light from a dark lantern he carried.

"Your sarvant, Captain," said the newcomer, "and yours, madam."

"So, Peter," said I, "it's you?"

"Ay, ay, Captain," said Peter Catlin. "And all's ship-shape for the trip you know of."

He turned and walked beside us.

"Why do you carry a lantern?" I asked. "The night is not dark."

"'Tis true, sir, I do not want it here," he replied, "but we shall need it before we get to the spot where the boat lies. We've to go along narrow waterside paths, and I made it ready to spare time."

"What is the name of this lugger?" said I.

"The *Merry Brother,* sir, Jem Peeke, master," he replied. "How has the journey passed wi' ye?"

"As smoothly as possible," said I. "You are the first person we have seen on the road since we left Rushmere."

"Please God, I hope it'll end as well," said the old man.

"What do you fear?" I asked, quickly marking the current of feeling in his tone.

"If I knew that, Captain," he returned, "I'd be easier in my mind. There's a something on my spirits, and I don't rightly know what. All the afternoon yesterday as I rode down here I'd a strange feeling that I was followed. I ne'er caught a glimpse o' aught, and

Lcrd knows I turned in my saddle often enow to look. I ne'er heard a sound, and yet I felt so. There seemed no reason for it, but there 'twas, and there 'tis now."

"It is a feeling common to all enterprises in which hazard lies," said I reassuringly. "How far have we to go again?"

"We turn there," he rejoined, and led the pony across the highway towards the hedge. As we drew nearer to the tall black shadow the mouth of a lane became visible. Peter led the pony into it and I followed behind, for there was not room enough to march abreast. We had gone half a mile or more along this narrow byroad when, our feet being silenced by a strip of turf, I caught a sound as of two or three horsemen coming on far behind us.

"Peter," I called softly, "is this road much used by riders?"

"Little or never, sir," he replied. "They keep to the main, and very few walking have occasion to come this way."

"There are people on horseback coming towards us, nevertheless," said I. "Do you go on a little, and I will wait at this bend to make sure."

"Oh, do not run into any danger!" breathed Cicely.

"Danger, dearest," I replied. "I will give it a wide berth, be sure of that. If I am satisfied there are people following us, I will catch you up in a moment and we'll hide, though, to be sure, they can only be people of the country returning home late."

They went on, following the grassy margin, and I laid my ears in my neck and listened. The chink of horseshoes had died away. A fox barked in a copse, a chafer droned over; no other sound broke the intense stillness. I remained without moving for full two minutes, then turned and hurried after Cicely and her attendant.

I was still twenty or thirty yards from them when I heard a low, breathless cry full of excitement and triumph, and at the same instant a choking groan and the sound of a heavy fall. I ran forward at full speed, and at the sound of my feet a harsh strained voice called out:

"The reward is mine, my Lord. He is down, and here is the lady."

"My Lord!" thought I. "Ho, ho! you call to my Lord!"

I said nothing, and my ready-witted Cicely, cool and alert in the presence of danger, made no sound of appeal to me. She left me the full advantage of surprise. The lane was dark, for the hedges rose high above it and almost met, yet I could see Peter's body on the grass and a man grappling with Cicely so that she could not ride away. I had my sword, but I dared not use it. Strength was the only weapon I could employ. I stepped up, and by the luckiest chance at first touch seized a hand with a knife in it. I shut my fingers about the hard, knuckly fist and put out all my strength, crushing his hand into the haft he held. He would have screamed, but now I had him by the throat and stran-

gled his cry into a faint, throttled yelp. His other hand was on my wrist in an instant tugging fiercely to free his windpipe, and I knew that Cicely was released. I swung him aside into the hedge, caught sight of a stout hawthorn bole against the starry sky, and dashed his head against the knotty trunk. He fell all limp in my hands, and I tossed him into the grass. Peter's lantern had fallen from his grasp, had rolled into a rut, and now stood upright burning steadily, for the candle-flame shot a tiny pencil of light through a crack of the door. I picked it up and turned the light on Peter. The rogue had stabbed him in the shoulder, the blood welling freely from the wound, and the old man, dazed with the sudden attack, was only now coming to himself. I next turned the light on the assailant. He had the look of a groom or a keeper, and I did not know his face at all. Cicely was down at once and began binding up the wound with her kerchief.

"Go on, Captain," said Peter feebly, attempting to rise. "That wor' a foul stroke, if ye like. Took me in the back. But do ye go on a quarter-mile again to a cottage by the roadside. There's a man there will show ye——" His voice dropped and failed.

"We must carry him to the cottage he speaks of," said Cicely. "Put him on the pony, George. I will lead it and you hold him steady."

I did as she said, and we went as quickly as we could from the spot of the ambush. There had been no sign of any other living being about the place, but we knew

very well who were in the neighbourhood. To be attacked by them, encumbered as we were, would be to suffer a fatal disadvantage, and for my part I dreaded that Kesgrave and Colin Lovel lurked in every shadow. I felt certain that the Commodore's ill-timed indignation lay at the bottom of this. Kesgrave would suspect at once whence arose my kinsman's ill-temper; and, without a doubt, had flung out a cloud of spies to watch every movement of our friends and their servants.

We reached the cottage in safety, though my heart was in my mouth at the rustling fall of every leaf which fluttered from the trees, and I knocked at the door. A female voice parleyed with us from within, but opened upon Peter speaking to her, and I carried the old man into the house. Cicely followed me, leaving the pony to crop the grass of the lane, and the woman clapped to the door again and fastened it by a heavy wooden bar falling into the staples on either side. Then she led the way into an inner room where a fire of billets blazed on the hearth. Here I laid Peter down and we made careful examination of his wound. Luckily, the knife had missed a vital part, yet, tearing a long ugly gash in the flesh, it had left an injury too serious to admit of Peter moving farther. The sole occupants of the house were two women, one of whom promptly brought a bottle of brandy from a cupboard in the wall. A strong dram revived the old man, and he looked up eagerly.

"Where's your husband? Where's Tom?" he asked of the woman who administered the brandy.

"I don't know," she replied.

"They must be taken to Jem Peeke's house at once," murmured Peter, pointing to us.

"They must wait then till Tom comes back," said the woman; "there's no one here who can take them."

"No, no, at once!" pleaded the old man. "There's danger abroad; people on the watch for them."

"What people?" said the woman of the house.

"My little boy told me of three strange men he'd seen about here to-night," broke in the second woman; "two on horseback and one on foot."

Suddenly there came a furious knocking at the door. There had been no sound of any approach, but the heavy blows thundered through the house. The woman started forward.

"No," said Peter, waving his hand feebly to keep her back.—"Fly! Fly!" he called faintly to me.

"There is nothing else for it," said I to Cicely. "To stay here will be only to bring dreadful trouble upon folk taken in our company."

"Have you any other way from this house besides yonder door?" asked Cicely of the mistress of the house.

"Yes, mistress, and Jane Block will show it to ye at once, and good luck go with ye," she replied, being a woman clearly used to pursuit and flight, a thing not uncommon in that smuggling neighbourhood. The

knocking redoubled and Jane Block started forward nervously.

"Go, go! Only go!" whispered old Peter.

We bade him farewell, thanked the cottage woman, and followed our guide. She led us through a rude outbuilding behind the house, unfastened a door, and we were out in the night.

"This way," she whispered, and took Cicely's hand. Cicely took mine, and we walked thus through thick shades of trees until we felt by the swish of grass about our feet that we had entered a field. We came out from under the trees, and gradually my eyes attuned themselves to the dim, faintly lighted landscape—the cottage had been filled with the strong shine of a lamp.

We went down a slight slope, and at the foot of it I saw the twinkling of stars reflected in a smooth, full stream. It was crossed by a plank and handrail, and here the woman stopped.

"Cross here, and go right on," she said; "the path is wide and you can easily keep it, for the grass is long on both sides. It will lead you over a stile into the road. Make straight ahead, and you'll soon come to a little bunch of houses by the waterside. Anyone there will guide you to Jem Peeke's."

"Could you not come a little farther?" I asked. "We are strangers to the byways of this country."

"No, no!" she cried; "I must haste home at once. I have left my children alone," and with that she turned and ran away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MEETING AT THE MILL

We crossed the narrow bridge and went along the path. We found the road, but it forked within a hundred yards, and in the double darkness both of night and ignorance we marched along the wrong arm. We went on and on and saw no houses, yet had no suspicion we were in error, for we had not marked the other branch of the road turn aside, and the pale ribbon of the way we followed was plain at our feet in the starlight, running before us into the gloom.

"Where are the houses and where is the waterside?" said I at last.

"Listen!" returned Cicely. "Can you not hear the sound of water?"

We stopped, and I heard the noise of water plainly enough.

"It is not the water we want, at any rate," said I; "that is the rush of a stream over a weir."

We went on a little farther and a black building stood out against the sky to our right. "A mill-weir," I whispered. "Here is the mill."

Across a yard we saw an uncurtained window filled with the shine of fire and candle. I stopped and looked at it.

"I've a great mind to ask directions here," said I. "We've certainly gone wrong."

"Would it be safe?" whispered Cicely.

"Why," I replied, "for a certainty they could not know us, and whatever wonder was aroused by strangers asking questions at this time of night, they could not gossip of it before to-morrow, and then it would matter little to us, I hope."

We crossed the yard towards the door, a dark oblong patch in the whitewashed wall, and knocked upon it. I knocked three times before any answer was made, then a voice cried, "Come in." I lifted the latch, and the door opened at once upon a wide low kitchen, with sanded floor and great open hearth, where a faggot was cracking merrily. The occupants were two, a man and woman, both elderly, and neither turned to look at us as we entered. The woman was seated near the hearth in an attitude of rigid despair. The firelight played upon her grey face and stony eyes. A look of more dreadful trouble I have never seen written on the face of any human being. The man was seated by the table, leaning his head upon his hand, and looking at her with a fixed, anxious look. The table was spread with food and a lamp burned on it, but the plates were empty; it was plain the food had been left untasted.

"Sir," I began, "will you do us the kindness——"

As if the sound of my voice had been a spring to set him in motion, the man turned his head and regarded us dully. Then he began to speak, and I stopped to

hear what he had to say. It was irrelevant as far as we were concerned; it was the outpouring of a heart too full to keep silence longer when there were ears that would listen to him.

"I've told her a score and a score o' times," he said, "that she's taken this trouble agin nature. Ye must gie your trouble vent or it'll do ye mischief. You see us, friends, in great sorrow. We never had but one child, a son, as fine an' straight a lad as ever ye set eyes on. An' nothing would hold him but he must go to this war, an' now he's been taken prisoner an' sent oversea to yonder Plantations they call 'em. It all come through him going to hear Master Raybone, the Independent minister over to Emleigh yonder. He thought a deal o' Parson Raybone, an' when he drummed up a score an' more to join Monmouth, Sam wor one of 'em. At first we wor mighty glad he wasn't to be torn to pieces as two or three of our folks suffered, but as far as I can make out this work oversea is little short o' slavery. It's a cruel time this. He's been lying in jail somewhere far west for a long time, an' we had no news o' him till of late, an' then we heard the ship he wos being carried off in sailed from Southampton this morning. We went there, but he's already been sent aboard, an' they wouldn't let us see him. Yes, our only lad has been sent aboard, an' they wouldn't let us see him. Yes, our only lad has been carried out o' the country, an' for sure we'll ne'er see him again, yet we never said so much as good-bye to him." His eyes worked round

to his poor old wife's face, but she made no sign or movement. She seemed frozen.

I murmured a few words of sympathy with them in their deep sorrow, then enquired for Peeke's house.

"Eh?" said the miller vacantly, turning his head again. I repeated my question.

"Jem Peeke's," he said slowly. "'Tain't very far from here. I'd take ye if things worn't like this wi' us."

"Would you give us clear directions?" I asked. "It is of the very last importance to us that we should be there within the next hour."

"Oh, 'tain't an hour away," said the miller, waving his hand in a dull, preoccupied fashion, as if my words scarcely struck home to his understanding. I waited a moment and he murmured, "Last importance, last importance," as if wondering what he had heard of as important.

"So important," said I, raising my voice a little to arouse him, "that it is a matter of life and death."

"Life and death," said someone in a low, harsh whisper. "And is it life and death to ye also?"

I started in surprise. It was the miller's wife who was speaking. Her grey face was turned upon us, her blanched lips were moving stiffly with the words, her heavy, pain-filled eyes were set full towards us.

With swift, gliding step Cicely started forward and went up to her. She took the woman's rough hand, knotted and twisted with long years of labour, between

both of hers and looked down at her with eyes filled with sweet sympathy and sorrow.

"Yes," said Cicely softly, "life and death, for my husband and me. They who have torn your son from you would also tear us apart and send us to prison and death."

"What?" breathed the woman sharply. "Were ye in Monmouth's affair?"

"No," said Cicely, "but we have sheltered and fed fugitives from the field, and it is known, and we can hope for no mercy."

"Ay, Jan!" cried the miller's wife, turning to her husband, "we must do something for them. Ay, that we must, poor young folk," and she took Cicely in her arms, and her tears came in a flood.

"Thank God!" cried old Jan softly, and patted the table and looked with shining eyes upon his wife's emotion. "An', please God, we'll do all we can."

"We wish," said I, crossing over to him, "to go to Peeke's house, where we shall be put aboard his lugger, the *Merry Brother*."

"And down the Water and away?" said the miller, nodding his head.

"That is the plan," I replied.

"Well, then, master," he answered, striking the table, "I'll tell ye the best way of all. I've a boat in a creek not fifty yards below my weir. An' I'll pull ye out into the Water an' down to where the *Merry Brother* lies at anchor. I know the place to an inch."

This offer was better and better, and I accepted it gratefully.

"An' ye want to be quick."

"We should be glad to do so," said I. "It is known, I fear, that we are in the neighbourhood."

"Ye must stir nimbly then," said the miller. "I'll to the shed an' fetch oars an' such like."

"I'll come and help you to carry them," said I, and I followed him out of the room. He went steadily along in the darkness, knowing the way, and I tumbled at his heels, for the change to the blackness without was confusing. We went some distance, then came to a stop before a building.

"They're in here," said the miller. "I ought to ha' brought a light, but there, I'm that mazed I don't rightly know what I'm doin'. Stand ye still a bit, I'll soon have 'em out."

He plunged into the shed and I heard him groping about. Soon he returned saying, "Here be one oar an' that's all. I've just minded me as t'other oar is down in orchard. My man had it days back to knock apples down wi'. He's as forgitful a chap as ever wor' at. 'Tis leaning against it for a crown. I'll go. Do ye bide a bit where ye are, for there's water all about. 'Tis awkward 'cept ye know the path."

He went away and I was left alone. My ears told me that the miller spoke truly of the water, for it lapped softly somewhere very near. Some moments passed and then a faint shine came into the air about me. It grew,

and gradually objects about me glimmered into distinctness. I saw that the building near which I stood was beside the road, that an open gate was half-a-dozen yards before me, and the growing light was from a lantern or such held by a person coming along the way towards the mill. Cicely and I had evidently passed this open gate in the darkness and gone on to the next giving on the yard of the dwelling-house. I moved back round a near angle of the building, for as I stood the light would fall directly upon me. I heard the footsteps but could gather nothing clearly from them, for the way was very sandy hereabouts and muffled the tread.

The light came nearer, striking up strongly into the trees which overarched the road and causing a smooth ashen trunk to shine like frosted silver, and it paused opposite the gate. This I could judge by the shadow of the building, which swept steadily back, then stood still. The light striking into the mill premises from the road showed a broad path, a path of grass and then a full, smooth, dark stream lipping the bank within a few yards of me and gliding on towards the weir which roared below. I heard a murmur of voices, and suddenly the light grew rapidly, projecting corners and angles sprang into view, the pebbles of the path shone; the person carrying it and his companions were coming through the gate. I was drawing backward across the grass as they came round the corner. As fortune would have it, they turned my way, and the red light of a blazing torch fell full upon me.

"My luck again," said a soft, laughing voice; "my luck against the world. It never failed me."

There was a shine of flashing steel as my Lord Kesgrave saluted me with his drawn sword; Colin Lovel was behind him, and a man lighted them with a torch.

"'Twas an odd thing that I felt so resolute to turn in and see if aught were known here," went on the Earl. "The Fates had compassion on me, I suppose, and were unwilling to see me further baulked. Atropos took up her shears. She knew there was a thread shortly to be snipped."

Of a sudden Kesgrave's raillery was oddly interrupted. The man holding the torch was the fellow I had dashed against the hawthorn bole. I had cracked it in my rough handling, so much was clear, since blood had trickled from among the hair and dried upon his face. He whipped a pistol from his breast and fired full at me. He missed me, luckily, but I felt the wind of the bullet on my cheek. The crack of the pistol was followed by an instant cry of anger. It was from Kesgrave. Then, from his position, a little behind the torchbearer, he struck a fierce sweeping blow. The sword, gleaming in the red light of the torch, flashed cold and bright as it darted through the air and fell upon the wrist still holding out the smoking pistol. So fierce and skilful was the stroke, so trenchant the blade, that the pistol fell to earth, the fingers clutched round the butt still clasping it; the hand was severed from the arm. For an instant the unhappy wretch stood at

gaze, his eyes fixed upon the spouting stump; then he tossed aside the torch, grasped his wrist desperately to check the flow of blood, and hurried groaning from the place.

Colin Lovel had seized the torch instantly before I had any chance to take opportunity of the slight confusion, and Kesgrave puffed out a long breath slowly.

"Insolent rogue," he murmured. "To come within an ace of baulking me of my vengeance. Mr. Ferrers, it has been a great temptation to me to despatch you along the common path of such as face Jeffreys in these days; to hear you harangued by that past-master in the art of consoling those who are presently to dangle from a beam, and then to see you in the hands of the common hangman. But I could not do it. It is true that I am depriving thousands of my fellow-countrymen of the pleasant sight occasioned by the disposal of a rebel; but, at times, selfishness is too strong. As it would not be permitted that I should place the noose about your neck and drive the cart from under you, I am compelled to deal with you privately."

While he talked Colin Lovel made one step aside, keeping a wary eye on me all the time, and thrust the torch into a bank of soft earth. There it stood, the flame running up to a point in the windless night and illuminating strongly the patch of grass between the barn and the river. I had only one wish. I wished I had had a chance to strip off my coat. I love my shoulders free when I have tough work before me, and it was

tough now with a vengeance. I had tried both men. I feared neither singly. But together! I had given odds at sword-play many a time, but not such odds as these! Behind me the orchard wall ran down to the water's edge. I backed to it and stood on guard. My enemies addressed themselves instantly to their work and came across the green towards me. For an instant I gave them no heed. They might have been in another world for the attention I paid them. Strongly, warmly, my thoughts went towards Cicely. She was in yonder black bulk of house consoling the bereaved mother; who was to console her if—— I beat the thought back. I must come through.

CHAPTER XXV

HOW ALL SCORES WERE SETTLED

I PLACED myself in guard, my great sword gripped as I had gripped it on the night when the bloodhounds attacked us, the flesh of my hands wedged into the ribs of the stout brass handle. In my left hand I held my hat.

Slowly, almost solemnly, and with even step, my opponents drew across the patch of turf. The torchlight flashed along the Earl's cheek. It was twisted into a smile. His eyes I could not see. But I knew quite well how they looked. I knew the cruel mocking which filled them. I had never been face to face with him since I learned of the foul marriage he had planned for Cicely. Fierce anger burned up within me, but I crushed it back. This was no time for anything but the coldest, nicest calculations. When almost within striking distance they moved apart. Between them, the flaring torch struck full into my eyes. I drew myself closer together, felt my feet square under me, and was altogether surprised when Colin Lovel alone sprang upon me. His attack was swift, furious, and masterly. I held his darting blade, checked, parried, guarded, no more. I dared not attempt a return stroke. It would have laid me open to the Earl, who stood on my left

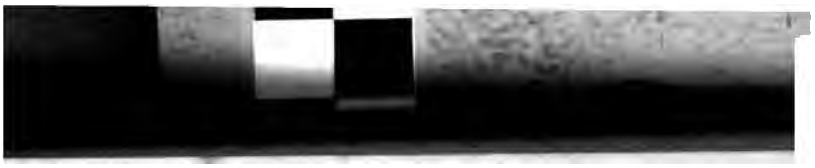
hand. To extend myself for either cut or thrust would have given him the choice of where he should drive his weapon into me before I could recover. He would have had me still more at an advantage had he stood on my right, but I knew very well why he chose to stand on the side where my heart lay. I watched him with the corner of my eye, and, again to my surprise, I found Colin Lovel was watching him also. The Earl made a movement. I half turned. Lovel stepped back, relinquished the combat, and made a noise in his throat, a sort of dissatisfied growl. But the eyes of both men were upon me keenly, their swords were ready; I could take no advantage of this strange lack of common purpose.

"Well, well," murmured Kesgrave tolerantly, as if humouring a foolish fancy, "I'll hold to my promise. I was but marking the fifth rib."

I was at no loss now to define this promise. Burning with rage at his defeat, Colin Lovel had bargained for a chance to redeem his lost credit; he would beat me single-handed if possible, if not, then the combined assault.

The value of the Earl's promise was seen within the instant. Lovel engaged me again with the desperate fury which marked his play when his sullen passion was aroused, and almost with him Kesgrave sprang at me. He gave no warning of his attack. He feared too much the jealousy of his follower. But I knew it was coming. I felt it in my bones. I dared not disengage my weapon; I had but my left hand. With my hat in it I made a

swift snatch and knew that I had hold of the sword. I felt the keen edge come through the stout felt and sink into my fingers, but I turned the blade up and away, and at the same moment Colin Lovel growled again like a dog whose bone is being snatched from him, and slackened his assault. It was my chance. There was no time for play of arm or body. I set the strength of my wrist against the sheer weight of my heavy weapon and slashed at Kesgrave's head. With a furious oath he tugged fiercely at his sword to disengage it from my grasp. I tightened my grip, though the edge was grating against the bone. Better lose fingers than lose life. He saw that he could not get his blade free in time to meet my cut. With an angry cry he loosed the hilt and leapt back. I dropped the sword, and put my heel upon it, and turned to Colin Lovel. His weapon hung threateningly above me. He had returned to the attack on seeing his master lose his sword, and was launching a furious cut at my head. I made my parry barely in time. The sweeping blow was no more than caught on the guard of the hilt and turned aside, the flat of the blade descending on my wrist with such force and catching the bone so shrewdly as to benumb my grip. I felt my sword slipping from my hand, its own weight dragging it earthward. I tried to tighten my clutch. In vain. The jarred muscles refused to answer. I saw Kesgrave's hand drop to his pocket. I did not wait for the pistol to appear, I did not wait for Colin Lovel to mend his blow. I let my sword fall and sprang



full upon the Earl. My leap took him utterly by surprise; I had him in my grip in an instant. I retained the command of the upper part of my sword-arm, and I pinned him with the left hand and right elbow. I held him with his back to me, his arms fast to his sides. He struggled furiously to get free; he lashed out with his heels like a wrestler at a west-country fair; he tried to dash his head into my face. Many such a bout had I played, and my experience stood me in good stead. Colin Lovel was up in an instant. I interposed his master's body as a buckler. He darted about; I wheeled. He swung up his sword to strike at my head, which stood higher; he hesitated. I felt the life begin to tingle back into my numbed fingers; I locked my hands together, I put out every effort to crush Kesgrave into stillness. My strait was desperate; my strength was the strength of fury. I crushed his shoulders together; I felt bones strain and go; my enemy screamed and called upon Colin Lovel. The latter sprang in, his sword shortened to stab me without fear of striking his master, when round the corner came the miller, the scull over his shoulder. I was facing him. I saw plainly the look of surprise he cast upon the flaring torch, the look of wonder upon the knot of combatants. Then the old man laid his scull before him, pikewise, and ran upon Colin Lovel. The latter had seized my shoulder and drawn his arm far back when the broad blade of the heavy scull took him in the ribs and trundled him over like a ninepin. I had a moment free in

which to act. I took a stride to the edge of the river and gave a mighty heave, and tossed Kesgrave a couple of yards into the stream.

"'Tis deep and swift," cried the miller.

I knew it not before I threw him; my only object was to have him out of the way for a while. "I do it for you as well as myself," said I as I sprang for my sword. Supposing Colin Lovel held me in play, I had no mind to venture the old man armed only with an oar against the Earl, who had pistols without a doubt. Come what might, charge and priming were ruined for the present, and time, a little time, was everything. As Lovel gained his feet, splash! dropped his master into the dark, smooth current. The man ran to the bank, taking no further notice of us. I stood once again, sword in hand, ready for what he would, but I was now no more than a spectator, and the old miller, still clutching his oar, remained beside me.

"'Tis deep and swift, master," he murmured. Upon the instant I had a proof of it. Colin Lovel gave a cry and ran full ten yards along the bank. I followed him with my eyes and saw a white face rise to the surface, a white face with wild eyes. The stream had carried Kesgrave so far between sinking and first rising. Colin Lovel cast aside his sword and plunged into the millrace. He swam with swift, powerful strokes and seized his sinking Lord. That conquered me. I had no reason to love either. But I could respect that staunch,

dogged faithfulness. Who better? I had been so served myself.

I caught the scull from the miller and ran for the torch. "Gather the swords," I called to him as I went. I hurried to the bank and tried to reach the struggling man with the oar. I say man, for Kesgrave was doing nothing to help himself. Whether he could not swim, whether I had crushed him helpless, I knew not; I shall never know. I saw only that Colin Lovel had fixed his teeth in the cuff of his master's coat and was striking for the bank with strong sweeping strokes. He was a good two yards beyond my reach, but drawing nearer inch by inch as he travelled down with the current and forged in towards the shore. His strong, white teeth shone in the torchlight, his dark, strained face was full of the eager passion of his struggle. I encouraged the swimmer with a cry of hope. I thrust the oar down beside the bank to see if I could wade out yet not to lose my depth, but the long scull went down, down and touched no bottom.

"It's a sheer ten feet," said the miller, who came up. The strength of the stream, too, was prodigious. It nearly snatched the oar from my grasp.

"God help them!" murmured the miller; then he demanded suddenly of me, "Are they King's men?"

"It comes to the same," said I. Now that I knew the strength of the flying race I could measure the splendid fight Colin Lovel was making, and I lay down on the bank and stretched my body across the water

and held the oar at my farthest reach. It was a yard beyond him still, and his eyes were now wild, desperate, like some creature in its death-agony. His strength was failing, and he felt it, and the pitiless, inexorable stream, its strength could not fail.

"He is yielding," said the miller. It was true. I sprang to my feet. The old man clutched my arm and pulled me back.

"What madness is this?" he cried. "And would you also throw your life away? What of the lady?"

What of the lady indeed. I gasped and came to myself. The sight of that grand fight for life for himself and master had utterly carried me away. It was beyond mortal power to stand by idle and not take a hand in the game. But the miller's words sobered me. And the next instant the water was blank. Without a sign, without a sound, Colin Lovel had yielded in the unequal strife, and the dark, smooth stream was empty of all save the swift bubbles and streaks of foam gliding over its polished surface.

"We may reach them below," said the miller. I caught up the oar and hurried after him. He was running round a thick clump of willows which edges the stream, and as I cleared the trees the noise of the weir grew and grew and thundered in my ears.

"No, no," said he. "Look!"

He held the torch high and a faint glimpse of white showed in the middle of the stream: it was a face come to the surface; the current had carried them farther

out. We followed step by step, but we saw no more of them until the brink of the weir was reached. Then, just as the water curved to its leap, smooth, and full, and round, before it broke into a thousand foamy falls, a dark mass rose at the very lip of the descent, as if some power had thrust it upwards to ride over clear in our sight. 'Twas but for an instant we saw it. Yet, plainly we made out two men locked in the fierce death-clutch of those who struggle together in deep waters. They shot with frightful speed down the smooth water-slide, and the roaring turmoil below received and swallowed them.

"Naught can help 'em now," said the miller. "We can go no farther along the stream here. An' the river 'll carry 'em like a racehorse down into the creek."

I told the old man of all that had happened since he left me, and he went to search for the severed hand. He found it at once and tossed it far into the deep stream. In like manner he disposed of the two swords, and lastly flung the torch after.

"Not a sign left," said he. "I'll throw some earth on the blood. Come!"

I stumbled through the darkness after him back to the house. He had both oars now and laid them down by the door. He opened it, and I looked in over his shoulder. The lamp burned brightly, the fire blazed and crackled; Cicely and the miller's wife were seated in talk near the hearth. It was the quietest, the most peaceful scene. We went in. It seemed to me that

Cicely must surely turn eyes of wonder on me, marvelling what had delayed me, but she only glanced up and smiled towards me and returned to her talk. Could it be that it was but a short time ago we had left the quiet kitchen, and that then my Lord Kesgrave and his man Colin and a poor varlet rejoicing in two hands had been walking along the way in as good case as man could wish to be? And now!

I glanced at my watch. It was a matter of minutes. So I told myself, but it was a thing beyond acceptance to the reason. I took a handkerchief from my pocket and wrapped it round my fingers. The bleeding had stopped, but I wished to hide the stains. The miller's wife pressed me to eat, but I had no heart for food.

"What time did ye bargain to be wi' Jem Peeke at?" asked the miller.

"By the turn of the tide," I answered.

"Ye see, wife," said he, "they must be away at once. The tide's turning now." He lighted a lantern and we all set out. Now we moved in the other direction, leaving the roar of the weir behind us. We went through a garden, a field, a coppice, and came to a little wooden landing-stage at the waterside. Here a boat was moored by its painter. The miller drew it in and his wife took the lantern. We parted from her with many thanks, and the good soul, who had room in her heart for other feelings besides her great sorrow, wished us good luck and happiness a hundred times.

Then we sat down in the stern seat, and the miller

took the oars and pulled away down the river, a red shine from the lantern following us as we went.

"Hasn't everything turned out fortunately for us?" whispered Cicely, with a little fond pressure of my arm.

"You may well say so," I replied, for she spoke truer than she knew, nor did I add more at the moment. There would be plenty of time soon, I hoped, to relate the story at leisure.

I had unwound the handkerchief from my left hand, which, hitherto, I had been lucky enough to keep out of sight, and was trailing my fingers through the water to wash the blood away, when the boat struck something. It was something soft and yielding, for it scarce checked the boat's way; there was no sound of impact. Then I felt that my fingers were among a tangle of floating hair and sweeping a cold, wet face. The boat shot swiftly on again, as the miller dipped the oars on which he had hung for an instant. In a moment he began to speak. The tone was that of a man who talks to himself. It was low, musing, and yet had a ring of decision.

"I care naught," he said, "naught. 'Twill never trouble me for a second that I saw it. Such as they care less for a man's life than a sheep's. 'Twas their turn this time."

He said no more but pulled steadily on. It was plain he suspected what the boat had struck upon and was chewing the affair over to himself.

Soon the little vessel began to rise and fall upon somewhat rougher water. My eyes by this time had become accustomed to the faint starlight, and I could make out that we had been moving along a broad creek and were now coming out upon the open water. The miller considered his bearings for a moment, then pulled alongshore. A quarter of an hour passed and I saw the rigging of a vessel rise against the starry sky.

"Ship ahoy!" cried the miller softly.

"Ay, ay!" came a voice in return.

"'Tis the *Merry Brother*," said the miller to me. "'Twas Jem Peeke who spoke."

"Who's wi' ye, Silas?" asked Peeke, for the recognition by voice had been mutual.

"Your passengers," replied the miller, shipping his oars as he was alongside the lugger.

There was a whistle of surprise, and then a lantern was hung out over the vessel's side.

A few words between the skipper and myself assured him that we were the people he had been engaged to carry. He flung a rope-ladder down and blew a shrill note on a whistle. The ladder was for us, the whistle a signal to the shore. We had barely reached the deck when the plash of oars was heard and a seaman who had been awaiting us rowed up. The boat was hoisted, the anchor raised, and sail was made. The good miller stood by to see the last of us, and waved his dusty cap as the lugger felt the breeze and moved from her anchorage, leaving him beyond the glow of the lantern.

Soon we were well in the fairway and the lantern was put out. Wind and tide favoured us, a lively breeze swelled the canvas, and the *Merry Brother* slipped southwards through the night towards the open sea and safety.

As there may be many who like to know just how things ended with people in our strait I add this note written in the month of November, in the year 1689. cheerful years in a house overlooking a canal which runs from the Hague to Scheveningen. In November, 1688, I came over in the train of the Prince vember, 1688, I came over in the train of the Prince of Orange to Torbay. All England rose at us, but in friendship, in joy at our coming. The day of James and Jeffreys was over once and for all. Our leader came to the throne as easily as ever man did in like case, and Cicely was free to join me, and we settled down in our house at Whitemead in January of this year. Whitemead had been redeemed at an easy composition by Sir Humphrey, but my wife lost Great Barrow utterly. 'Tis fortunate the loss never cost her a thought. My scattered servants had rallied about me, Tom Torr, Jem, William, Quance, all of them. The Lees and Jan have been to see us and wish us joy on being home again. In the summer I rode over to see the miller and his wife, and found them hearty and cheerful, being in great hopes of redeeming their son through a ship-captain of their acquaintance. They had never heard

a word more of that night's doings, so the man with the severed hand must have kept his own counsel. Of him I know nothing. Of the disappearance of the Earl and his man strange stories are current. I have been told some of them myself since my return, but not one comes within a long shot of the truth. A month since Cicely and I went to London to pay a visit to her aunt. One day towards dusk I called at Old Man's to see Major Temple, who is to be found there at that time. Oddly enough, the circumstances of four years before were repeated, yet, perhaps, not oddly, when it is remembered how fixed are the habits of men. I was standing in chat with my friend, and yet the current of underthought was running upon the wretched hopeless afternoon of four years ago, since which time I had not been in the place, when up came a carriage and in came Damerel. He saw me at once. It is possible I was not looking overfriendly, but, to the great delight of my companion, he turned and fairly ran for his coach, and beat an instant retreat. I could afford to laugh with Temple. He laughs best who laughs last.

THE END.

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